Treat with Caution

Treats to Tempt You Book 1

By Serenity Woods

*Copyright 2014 Serenity Woods

All Rights Reserved

This book is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the writer’s imagination or have been used fictitiously. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, actual events, locales or organizations is coincidental.

Sign up for my Newsletter and be the first to know when my books are released. You’ll also be able to download my Starter Library for FREE!
Chapter One

“You are the most annoying man in the history of the world,” Tasha snapped.
Kole grinned, stretched out on the sand, and put his hands behind his head. “Thanks.”
“It wasn’t a compliment.” Tasha glowered at him, but he remained unrepentant, his grin spreading if anything. Gritting her teeth, she pushed her glasses further up the bridge of her nose and turned her gaze to the sea. Honestly. Trying to have a conversation with Kole Graham was like trying to wrestle a crocodile.

They sat with Kole’s sister Maisey and his best mate Joss on Coopers Beach, a long crescent of sand that formed part of the beautiful Doubtless Bay in the Far North of New Zealand. The summer breeze played with Tasha’s hair, and waves crept up the sand and then slid back, sensual as a lover’s fingers. Over her head, the pohutukawa trees displayed their Christmassy red flowers, and her bare legs glistened in the warm December sun. It could almost be paradise. Except she was certain there weren’t any crocodiles in paradise.

She glanced back at Kole. If she were anyone else, she might have considered him attractive, with his short dark hair, lean jaw, firm but sensual lips, and muscular frame highlighted by the All Blacks rugby shirt that stretched across his torso and around his impressive biceps. He carried himself with a confident sexiness bordering on arrogance, and this, along with his wry sense of humor, suggested he was probably excellent in bed.

Too bad he annoyed the hell out of her.

He looked across, saw her watching him, and raised an eyebrow. He was always trying to embarrass her, to make her blush and lose her composure. He hadn’t managed to do so once in the eleven years they’d known each other. Tasha didn’t embarrass easily.

“Stare any longer, I’ll have to start charging,” he said.

“You have chocolate on your top,” she pointed out. “I was wondering whether to find you a pelican bib.”

He looked down at his rugby shirt, spotted the offending piece of confectionery, and scooped it up. “I was saving that for later.” He sucked it off his finger.

Tasha rolled her eyes. “I’m not surprised you’re still single at twenty-eight. You’re like a trained ape. Without the training.”
“For God’s sake, you two.” Maisey sent them an exasperated glare. “You’re like a couple of five year olds. I’m tempted to send you to bed without any tea.”

“I think she meant separate beds,” Joss said at Kole’s approving murmur.

Maisey snorted. “The space-time continuum would collapse if Kole and Tasha slept in the same bed.”

“Damn straight,” Tasha said.

Kole, however, smiled lazily. “Oh, I don’t know.” His gaze travelled down her, then slowly back up. His lips curved, and he opened his mouth to speak again.

Tasha looked over the top of her glasses. “If you say anything about Uranus, I swear, I’m going back to the car.”

Maisey and Joss laughed. Kole chuckled and winked at Tasha. She smiled, but didn’t let it reach her eyes. She really was mad at him, and she didn’t want him to think she’d forgiven him.

Joss checked his watch. “I’d better be getting back. Afternoon surgery starts in thirty minutes. I can’t believe you talked me into having lunch on the beach on a Friday—I have a shed load of paperwork to do.”

“Oh, stop being such a stick-in-the-mud,” Maisey scolded. “You’re no fun since you came back from curing A.I.D.S. in South Africa or whatever it was you were doing.”

“I wish I had cured A.I.D.S.,” he said, “but unfortunately the universe had other things in store for me.”

Maisey rambled on about how dull he’d been since he moved back and become a boring old G.P. Tasha shot him a sympathetic look. Her brother Fredek—who everyone called Fox—had told her that not only did Joss’s mother have Multiple Sclerosis, but his father had started to show signs of Alzheimer’s. Add to that a sister whose husband had recently left her with four kids to take care of, and it became clear family responsibilities weighed heavy on Joss’s mind.

He went to get up, and Tasha held out a hand. “Oh no, not yet. I brought you out here to help me talk this idiot into giving us the shop, and you’re not leaving until he does.”

“You’re going to be here a long time then.” Kole slid on his sunglasses. “Because I have no intention of giving it up.”

Tasha pursed her lips. “Maisey!”

“What?” Maisey flicked her fingers at her brother. “No good asking me. He never does anything I want him to.”
Tasha turned her glare onto Joss, who shrugged. “He does tend to have a mind of his own.”
“But it’s not fair. Come on, Maisey, you know that shop would be perfect for Treats. Kole can have a studio anywhere.”

But Maisey just sighed. “We’ll find somewhere else, Tash. Stop getting your knickers in a twist.”

Tasha blew out a long, irritated breath, tempted to kick sand over Kole. “I’ve known you eleven years,” she said to him. “And I swear you’ve frustrated and irritated me nearly every day.”

“Only nearly? I’m slipping.”

She glowered. “I should have guessed you were going to be a thorn in my side the first day we met.”

“Where was that?” Maisey frowned.

“You were making muffins,” Kole said.

“You remember?” Tasha certainly did.

The two girls had met on the first day of high school, had discovered they shared a love of cooking, and had quickly become firm friends. Maisey had invited Tasha to her house one Saturday to try out a new muffin recipe, and the thirteen-year-old girls had been halfway through the preparation when Kole and Joss had burst into the kitchen, hot, sweaty, and filthy after a weekend rugby match. At seventeen, both boys had been loud and arrogant, and they’d proceeded to make the girls’ lives a misery.

“Oh yes, I remember,” Maisey said. “You dipped your muddy fingers in the mixing bowl, ate all our chocolate chips, flicked muffin mix at each other, and generally made a nuisance of yourselves.”

“Doesn’t sound like us,” Joss remarked.

“Maisey cried, and you stamped your feet like a toddler,” Kole said to Tasha.

“Do you remember what you called me?” Tasha asked.

“I said, ‘What a fucking banshee,’ and you threw your shoe at the door.”

Maisey and Joss laughed. Kole grinned. Tasha just scowled. “At least Joss has grown up a bit,” she said. “You haven’t changed at all. In fact I think you’ve gotten worse.”

“Thank you.”

“It wasn’t a fucking compliment!”
Laughing, Kole brought up a hand to adjust his sunglasses, and the gold ring on his right hand glinted in the sunlight. The ring had belonged to Harry, she was sure—his and Maisey’s older brother, who had died in a motorbike accident five years before, driving home too fast after an argument with a girlfriend. Tasha had watched Kole throughout the funeral as he’d comforted Maisey and her older sister, Skye. He had remained dry-eyed, jaw knotted and fists clenched, clearly determined not to show any emotion. He’d been the same ever since, as if he focused on only two things in life—what he wanted, and the easiest way to get it.

“For the record, I’m close to throwing my shoe at you now,” she stated. “Maisey and I have planned this shop for years.” They were going to call it Treats to Tempt You, and they planned to sell handmade chocolate truffles, ice-cream, and espresso coffee, mainly to the thousands of tourists that flocked to Doubtless Bay in the summer, but also hopefully to locals as well as they spread the word. “You’re standing in the way of us fulfilling our childhood dream. How does that make you feel?”

“I feel fine, thank you.”

She tried again. “What about Elle and Caitlin? Maisey and I were lucky to find two other girls willing to come in with us and run the place, but what if they change their minds because of your idiocy?”

“Tasha, I’m not stopping you from having a shop. Just from having that shop.”

“I want that shop.”

“So do I. And I got there first. So deal with it.” His good humor had vanished, and he was glaring at her behind his glasses, she was sure of it.

But she’d fallen in love with the shop on the waterfront as soon as she’d seen it. She and Maisey had driven around for days looking at places, and nothing had seemed suitable—they were all off the beaten track, too expensive, or too run down and would take money to fix up. The shop in the harbor was ideal—small but not too small, with a proper kitchen, and a room out the back for storage. It was neat and clean, with enough room for a counter and a few tables and chairs, although mainly they were intending to offer a takeaway service. It was perfect.

They’d gone into the agency and asked for details, only to be told that someone had already agreed to take the place the day before. He wouldn’t be signing the lease papers for another eight days because the owner, Andrew, was returning from a trip to Peru and wanted to check out the new tenant for himself. But for all intents and purposes, the deal was done.
It was only when they’d met up with the boys and talked about their disappointment that they’d discovered Kole was the one who’d beaten them to it.

She’d already tried several times over the past week to talk him into giving the shop to them, without success. But she wasn’t prepared to give up yet. “I know you want a new studio, but it doesn’t have to be on the waterfront. We need somewhere people walk past. I’ll help you look for somewhere else; I’ll even ring around the agencies and scout out some properties for you.”

“Actually I do need somewhere visible as I want to pull business in off the street for family holiday portraits, and the waterfront shop is perfect.”

“You’re such a selfish son of a bitch!”
“A selfish son of a bitch with a shop,” he said, smirking.
“Whatever happened to ladies first?” she snapped.

He lifted his glasses to study her. “Oh, in every other way I believe ladies should always come first.”

Joss sniggered, and she sent Kole a sarcastic look. “Call yourself a gentleman?”

He lowered his glasses again. “Nope.”

“Kole!”

“I want the shop, Tasha, and I got there first, fair and square. Stop nagging. You sound like a fishwife.”

Irritation and frustration whirled inside her, and she pushed herself to her feet. Glaring at him, she stuffed her hands in the pockets of her shorts. She didn’t usually like him to know how much he annoyed her, but for once she didn’t try to hide how upset she was.

“You just don’t care, do you? You’ve got what you want, and you don’t care that you could be helping your sister and her friends achieve a lifelong dream.”

“Nope,” he said again.

She clenched her fists in her pockets. “You think you’re omnipotent, don’t you?”

“Better than being impotent.” He grinned.

She was too angry to smile, even though Joss and Maisey were trying to stifle their laughter. “You’re like it in everything,” she said hotly, “in work, in sport, with women.”

“Impotent?”
“Omnipotent,” she yelled. “Using them and then dropping them as soon as they get serious.”

“Doesn’t sound like me at all.” He looked smug and self-satisfied, which only served to irritate her more.

She ground her teeth. “I bet you think you can make any woman in the world fall in love with you.”

He leaned over to take a mint from the tube Joss offered him, popped it into his mouth, and lay back on the sand. “Yep.” His provocative grin heated her up like a Bunsen burner, and steam almost hissed out of her ears.

“Well, you’re not all-powerful, and anyway it wouldn’t surprise me if you were impotent.”

He chuckled. “Want me to prove I’m not?”

Fury swept over her. “Like I’d ever sleep with you! I can’t imagine why any woman would ever want to, and I certainly can’t conceive how a woman would ever fall in love with you.”

He shrugged. “You have to get to know me first.”

“Kole Graham, I know you probably better than anyone else save your sister, and I wouldn’t fall for you if you were the last man on Earth. In this galaxy. In the universe!”

At that, he sat up and slid off his sunglasses, then studied her, his arms around his knees. “I see.”

Maisiey laughed. “Oh, I think you would, Tash. He’s quite determined when he wants something.”

His lazy, amused smile turned the Bunsen up higher, and something exploded inside Tasha. “Absolutely not.” She bent to look into his eyes. “You’d fall for me before I ever fell for you.”

A brief silence fell. Then Maisiey said, “Uh-oh,” while Joss shook his head and gave a low whistle.

Kole held his sunglasses by one of the arms, and he swung them around in a circle. “You reckon?”

Not looking away, holding his gaze, she said, “Yep.”

Kole’s eyes, a warm hazel, studied her with interest, as if for the first time in his life he was really, truly looking at her. He tipped his head to the side, and the corner of his mouth curved up. “Hmm,” he said.
A frisson trailed down Tasha’s back as if someone had run a finger down her spine.

_Oops._
Chapter Two

“Tasha,” Maisey warned. “Don’t be daft.”

“No, wait,” Kole said. “I’m interested to hear this. So let me get this straight—you think if we dated properly, and we were allowed to…shall we say…use the talents God gave us to charm the other, I would fall for you before you fell for me?”

He studied the dark haired girl who had leaned forward to stare at him. He tended to think of her as short, although she was average height really, around five feet six. But from his six-two advantage he always towered over her, which was probably why he’d never completely shaken off his image of her as a kid, complete with braces, flat chest, and high pitched voice.

She’d grown up over the past few years, though. Gone were the braces, to be replaced by straight white teeth, even though he didn’t see them very often as she so rarely smiled. The high pitched voice had been replaced by a lower, husky one he couldn’t say was altogether displeasing. And as for the flat chest…he had a clear view down her T-shirt, and she’d definitely developed in that department.

“Are you looking down my front?” she asked suspiciously.

He raised his gaze to hers. “Yes.”

She stood with a mumbled curse and stuffed her hands back into her pockets, and there she was again, the thirteen-year-old fireball who had always driven him nuts. Raised by a mother who had been a famous model in her youth and who constantly hounded her about her weight and fashion sense, Tasha had rebelled completely against any advice Laura Wilde had given her. She never used makeup, pulled her hair back in a ponytail most of the time, and always wore black or muted colors. A blatant refusal to diet had led to her having a rounded figure, although she did enjoy exercise so she wasn’t quite as plump as she might otherwise have been. She hated the idea of contact lenses too, and always wore glasses with dark rectangular frames that made her look both studious and hard as nails.

Oddly, perhaps, in spite of her refusal to bow to social conventions and spend time on making herself attractive for the opposite sex, she’d had several partners he knew of, and he suspected, a few he didn’t. Part of the reason may have been that, unfortunately for her, she couldn’t hide the fact she was the daughter of a model. If a person looked closely behind the tomboy façade, she was actually rather beautiful, the slight exoticness of her features reflecting
her mother’s Russian origins. She had interesting eyes the color of polished mahogany with a fascinating circle of orange in the center, a straight nose, high cheekbones, and a wide but perfectly sculpted mouth.

It was a shame that what came out of it were usually insults aimed in his direction. Including the ones about to tumble from her lips like tennis balls from a bag.

“You’re a chauvinistic, arrogant, misogynistic, selfish bastard,” she snapped, “and the only reason any girl goes to bed with you is because you magically turn on the charm, and it’s like a smokescreen—it hides what you’re really like.”

“I’m not misogynistic.” He neatly avoided the other, possibly more correct, accusations. “I don’t hate women. I happen to like them very much. And of course I turn on the charm and put on an act—that’s what all guys do. You really think I’m the only man who doesn’t burp or fart on the first date?”

Maisey chuckled, and Joss grinned.

“I get your point,” Tasha admitted. Then her mouth set in a firm line. “But the fact is I know the real you. So what I’m saying is there’s no way I could possibly fall for your charms when I know how tarnished you are beneath the silver plating.”

Kole always knew when he was getting under Tasha’s skin—her eyes would narrow, she’d clench her teeth, and sometimes she’d get so angry she’d either yell or walk off. What she didn’t know was how much she got to him sometimes.

He could be arrogant, irreverent, and insouciant. It was partly cultivated and partly natural because, basically, he didn’t give a flying fuck what anyone thought of him. Ever since Harry died, he’d been determined to do exactly what he wanted with his life. What was the point in getting knotted up in worries and fears when at any moment the metaphorical wheels could slip from under him and everything would fade to black?

But that didn’t mean he didn’t feel anything, and her inference that women were only attracted to him because they didn’t know the real him stung.

Still, he didn’t show his hurt. Instead, he leaned back on his hands and raised his eyebrows. “Maybe the real me is the one the other girls get to see—did you ever think of that?”

Her gaze flicked over him, curious at that thought. Then she said, “Nah. I’m not falling for that. I know you’re an ass deep down.”
Irritation flared through him. “So which charm school did you go to again? Sweetheart, I can’t imagine falling for you if you danced around my bed naked with tassels on your tits.”

He’d hoped to infuriate her, but, to his surprise, her lips curved and she tipped her head from side to side as if thinking about the tassels as an option. “I have a few tricks up my sleeve,” she said. Her eyes twinkled.

He glanced at her chest. The notion of Tasha Wilde dancing around his bed twirling a pair of tassels wasn’t as distasteful as it should have been. She had nice breasts, generous and yet girlishly high, and where the cool summer breeze played across her skin, he could see her nipples peeping through her T-shirt.

She pointed two fingers in a V shape at him, then pointed at her face, drawing his stare from her boobs. “Eyes up, soldier.”

He met her gaze, unable to hide a smile. Her lips curved in response. They’d always bantered like this, teetering on the line between flirting and arguing. If he was honest with himself, he quite enjoyed it.

“You know,” Joss said, interrupting his train of thought, “if this were a bet, I’d put money on Tasha to win.”

“I don’t think that’s going to be…” The words sunk in, and Kole stared at him. “Wait, what?”

Joss shrugged. “She’s always gotten to you—you can’t deny it. You like to think you’re James Bond, impervious to a pair of fluttering eyelashes, but the truth is you’re an old romantic at heart. If Tasha turned it on and went all out, she’d reel you in like a twenty-pound snapper.”

“Bollocks,” Kole said.

“Actually,” Maisey said, “I have to agree with Kole. He’s immune to feminine wiles. I should know—I’ve tried them on him all my life and he’s hopeless.”

“It’s not quite the same thing when your sister uses them,” Joss said.

Maisey shook her head and gave Tasha an apologetic look. “I’m sorry to say it, but I don’t think you could win that bet. You’ve seen the kind of girls Kole goes out with. They’re like pampered Chihuahuas, all blonde hair and long nails, with brains the size of peanuts. You’re like a Rottweiler. A very small one.”

“I’d say I’m more of a German Shepherd,” Tasha said. “Intelligent and a very quick learner.” She raised her eyebrows at Kole.
“Actually, I would imagine you’re like a praying mantis,” he said. “I bet you bite guys’ heads off after you’ve slept with them.”

She grinned and shrugged as if to say perhaps. He smiled, surprised to feel the stir of something inside him. It could have been the way she was standing. Hands in the pockets of her stone-colored shorts, she’d dropped a hip and it accentuated the curve of her waist, making her look saucy and suggestive. Her legs were tanned and shapely, and although her hair remained tied up in the usual ponytail, strands fluttered around her face, softening it a little. She really was rather lovely. Beneath all the growling and yelling.

“Well,” Joss said, “perhaps you ought to put it to the test.”

They all looked at him. “What do you mean?” Tasha said.

The doctor stretched out and observed them both with interest. “You’re both so certain of yourselves. Prove it to us, then. Prove you’re immune to the other’s charms.”

“Joss…” Maisey warned.

“No, I’d quite like to see the outcome of this,” he said. “And let’s raise the stakes a little. There’s, what, eight days until the dude who owns the shop comes back from Peru?”

“Yes,” Tasha said cautiously.

“So let’s say whoever wins the bet, wins the shop.”

Everyone went quiet.

“That’s a stupid idea,” Maisey said eventually. “It’s like a bloody Shakespearean play.”

She looked at her best friend, then at Kole. “You’re kidding me,” she said as she saw the look on his face. “You’re not really considering this?”

He studied Tasha. Her face was expressionless, and he couldn’t tell what she was thinking.

It was a stupid idea. If they both knew they were dating for a bet, there would be no way they would allow themselves to fall for the other, especially in eight days!

Nevertheless, it had piqued his interest. Tasha had spoken so confidently. You’d fall for me before I ever fell for you. The stubborn part of him that hated to be beaten wanted to prove her wrong. Also, she’d spoken the truth when she said everyone put on a different face when they dated. And he wanted to know what hers was. How had she enticed the lovers she’d taken to bed? She was like a hedgehog, so prickly he couldn’t imagine her letting anyone close. What was she like when she dropped that hard, confident mask?
Unable to suppress a surge of naughtiness, he shrugged. “Doesn’t matter to me either way. I already have my name down for the shop, and even if I took the bet, I’d still win.”

Tasha’s eyes narrowed. “Right. You’re on.”

Maisey sat up hurriedly, brushing sand off her shorts. “No, no, no! This is a nightmare. You can’t do this.”

“Why not?” Joss looked thoroughly amused. “This is going to be better than an evening at the cinema. I’ll have to buy popcorn.”

“Because you can’t play with each other’s feelings like this.” To Kole’s surprise, Maisey looked upset. “Someone’s going to get hurt.”

“Well, according to Kole, he’d never fall for me even if I danced around his bed naked,” Tasha said, “so he doesn’t have a lot to worry about.” Her eyes met Kole’s, challenging. That comment had got to her, he thought. Interesting.

“And what about you?” Maisey frowned at her. “You know what he’s like. He has some kind of secret weapon he whips out on unsuspecting females—what if it actually works on you?”

“I’d quite like to see his secret weapon actually,” Tasha said with much amusement. Kole and Joss laughed, but Maisey glared at her. Tasha sighed. “Oh, come on. You really think men are the only ones who can have a fling without getting their emotions involved? We’re talking eight days—that’s not long enough to fall in love with anyone anyway.”

“So what’s the point?” Maisey asked, bemused.

Tasha studied him, tipping her head. A smile spread slowly across her face. “I want to see what all the other girls see.” She glanced at Maisey. “And I don’t just mean the secret weapon.”

Her eyes were intense, interested, and his heart rate picked up a little. She was serious about this.

“Yeah,” he said. “Me too.”

Her eyes widened a fraction, lighting with something—excitement? The thrill of the challenge?

“There you go,” Joss said. “A Midsummer Night’s Dream it is, then. Shake on it.”

“Wait, wait.” Maisey held up a hand. “There have to be a few rules.”

“Like what?”

“First off, no dating anyone else for eight days. That’s only fair.”

Kole and Tasha both nodded. “Okay.”
“And Joss and I will make the final decision. Next Sunday, we’ll announce who we think has the most feelings for the other. And you both have to agree to abide by the decision.”

Kole looked at his sister. She had a determined glint in her eye that told him she wasn’t messing around. But what did he have to worry about? He wouldn’t fall for any girl, let alone Tasha, in eight days. Not that she’d fall for him either—they’d always been too irritable with each other for that kind of connection to happen. But he might be able to work on her a bit, get her to at least admit he wasn’t quite the arrogant ass she always seemed to think he was.

“Okay.” He looked back at Tasha and held out his hand. “May the best man win.”

She chewed her bottom lip. Then she leaned forward and shook his hand. “Or woman.” Her eyes met his, unfathomable behind her dark-rimmed glasses, and deep inside he felt a shiver of anticipation.

This was going to be fun.
Chapter Three

Tasha dropped Kole’s hand and moved back. Warmth had flowed through her at his touch. Realization began to settle over her like a sheet of sand blown by the wind. Was she really considering this?

“Well, now that excitement’s over, I really have to get back to work.” Joss rose to his feet and dusted off his trousers. “You guys coming?”

“Actually, I wouldn’t mind a moment with my new girlfriend,” Kole said. “If you have the time, Tash? I’ll take you back to work afterward.”

Her heart increased its pace, but she shrugged. “Yeah, whatever.”

“Can you drop me off?” Maisey asked Joss as she also stood. She and Tasha were both working at the same café while they waited to set up their shop.

“Sure. Come on.”

Maisey gave the two of them a last look. “Have a think about this before you do anything stupid,” she warned. “It’s not too late to back out, you know.”

“I’m not backing out,” Tasha said firmly. “I want that shop.”

Kole gestured toward himself as if to say me too.

“It’s just…” Maisey hesitated. “We all get on so well. This will change things. And not necessarily for the better.”

“It’s eight days,” Tasha said. “Not even your brother’s that much of a Casanova. We’ll be fine.”

Maisey looked doubtful, but Joss tugged her sleeve, and they walked off up the beach toward where he’d parked his car.

Tasha glanced down at Kole. “What do you want to talk about?”

He leaned back, stuffed his hand in the pocket of his jeans, and withdrew the small camera he always carried around with him. “I want to take your picture.”

She sighed. “Kole…”

He held up the camera, then waited. “Say yes.” He always asked permission first. She liked that about him.

“No.”
His expression turned to amused exasperation. “We’re not going to get very far if you won’t do as you told.”

That made her chuckle. “You like to boss your girlfriends around?”
“I don’t mind the submissive type, I have to say.”
“Then we’re going to have a lot of trouble.”
He chuckled and gestured to the camera. “Well?”
“Go on, then.”
She stood patiently and looked at the sea while he clicked, used to this. She couldn’t remember a time when he hadn’t had a camera in his pocket. “What kind of camera is it?” she asked as he waited with the lens trained on her. “It’s quite tiny. I thought you usually use great big ones with the long lenses.”
“Too heavy when I’m out and about. I like to point and shoot at whim.”
She laughed, and he clicked again. “Got it.”
“Got what?”
“Your smile. It’s like the transit of Venus—it doesn’t come around very often so you have to catch it when you can.”
She gave him a wry look and sat on the sand next to him. He switched off the camera and tucked it back in his pocket, then leaned back on his hands, legs stretched out.
“So then,” she said. They sat close, their shoulders brushing. “Why did you agree to this bet?”
He looked across at her. “What do you mean?”
“You already have the shop. Why would you agree to go ahead with the bet when you could lose it?”
Usually, his eyes held frustration or exasperation whenever they looked at her. But at that moment, they were lit with something else. Interest? “Well,” he said, “firstly, there’s no way I’m going to lose.”
“Ha. Famous last words.”
“If you say so. I remain confident in my prediction.”
She rolled her eyes. “And secondly?”
“Can’t you guess?”
She frowned. “What do you mean?”
The corner of his mouth curved up. “I want you.”

Her thoughts shuddered to a stop as if someone had slammed on the brakes. “What? You’re teasing me,” she said cautiously. “I know I irritate you.”

“Well, yes. But that doesn’t mean I don’t want to see what lies behind that feisty façade.” He tipped his head. “We’ve always fought, and we’ve always hidden any feelings we’ve had for one another because I’m Maisey’s brother and you’re Fox’s sister. There’s always been an invisible line none of us wanted to cross. But do you really think I haven’t watched you dating guys and wondered what they get to see when they take you home?”

She swallowed against a nervous lump in her throat. She hadn’t thought this through. She’d imagined going on a few dates, maybe making out on the sofa… But Kole’s eyes and his words suggested he had a little more in mind.

“What are you saying?” she whispered.

“I wondered how far you wanted to take it.” His eyes were intense, amused. “Perhaps we should set some limits.”

The summer breeze stroked up her arms, and Tasha shivered, conscious of her nipples tightening beneath her T-shirt. She was determined not to let him see how he was unnerving her though. Part of her couldn’t shake the feeling he was already playing the game, trying to push her out of her comfort zone. Little did he know she didn’t really have one. “Or perhaps we shouldn’t,” she murmured.

His eyes widened. “Huh.”

“Just so you know, you fascinate me too,” she said. “You’re right—I’ve always kept a lid on it because there’s an unwritten law that we’re all out of bounds. But we’re all grown up now. I haven’t dated in a while. And I like sex. It’ll be interesting to see what I can show you.”

He chuckled at her choice of pronouns. “You’re very different to most girls I go out with.”

“I take that as a compliment.”

That earned her an exasperated look. “I don’t just date bimbos.”

“You always date bimbos. Nearly always. And even though most of them have an IQ lower than my shoe size, they still seem to see something in you I don’t get to see. I want to know what it is.”

“Well, then, I suppose you have eight days to find out.” His eyes challenged her to break it off.
“That’s twice as long as your normal relationships last,” she couldn’t stop herself from saying, even though her heart thumped at the notion of what she was getting herself into. “How will you cope?”

He didn’t smile, though. Instead, his eyes became hooded, as if he was already thinking about where this might lead. “Tash, I want to make this perfectly clear. If we do this, if we forget about being friends, if we date for eight days and you say there are no limits…” His gaze dropped to her mouth. “I’m not going to hold back.”

Her grin faded, and she had to stop herself from giving a big nervous gulp. “What do you mean, not hold back?”

“I want that shop.” He looked determined. “And I’m going to get it. So if you’re going to be my girl for eight days, you’ll be getting a hundred percent of me. No holds barred. You think you can handle that?”

She stared, and in spite of his arrogant assumption that would normally have her spitting feathers, she was suddenly lost for words. “I…um…”

“But then that’s it.” His eyes were clear. “I’m not looking for a relationship. And I don’t want you blaming me when you lose the shop and your heart.”

Surely, he was teasing her. No guy could be that confident of winning over a girl. In confirmation, his eyes twinkled and his lips curved.

Still, his words resonated through her as if someone had struck a tuning fork. You think you can handle that?

She looked down as she felt coldness on her hands, and realized she’d clenched them deep into the cool sand lying beneath the hot surface. Unfurling her fingers, she let the grains trickle through. Certain he wanted her to ask, she fought not to, but in the end she couldn’t stop herself. “What did you mean, ‘You think you can handle that?’”

He shrugged. “Some girls seem to think I’m quite…demanding, shall we say.”

A frisson travelled through her again that had nothing to do with the summer breeze. But she knew better than to show her fascination. “I can top that,” she said. “One ex told me I was so unladylike, I ought to work in a brothel.”

Kole roared with laughter, then sobered at the look on her face. “You’re kidding me.”

“Nope.”

His jaw dropped. “One of your boyfriends actually said that to you?”
“A boyfriend who was immediately elevated to the status of ex-boyfriend, yes.”

He looked genuinely puzzled. “Why?”

She didn’t particularly like thinking about it, as it made her feel uncomfortable to remember his acidic words that had bordered on disgust. But she’d mentioned it, and Kole wouldn’t give up unless she expanded on it. “He said I was insatiable. He didn’t seem to think that was a good thing. And…how shall I put it…he wasn’t keen on me making suggestions in the bedroom. He saw it as a criticism of his masculinity, I think.”

She’d thought Kole would make some sarcastic remark at that, would find it exceedingly funny. Instead, however, he surprised her by frowning.

“Fucking prick. I hope you told him where to shove his prudish comments.”

“I did. With very colorful and inventive language.”

He grinned. Slowly, a twinkle appeared in his eye as he gave her comments more thought.

“Insatiable, eh?”

“You think only men can be ‘demanding’, as you so delicately put it?”

He thought about it. “No. It’s a cliché, but then like most clichés, I guess it has a foundation in truth. It does usually seem to be the guys who want it, and the girls who are more laid back.”

She smiled. “This is going to be fun. Maybe I’ll win you over so much you’ll give me the shop without a second thought.”

Eyes wide, he pointed over her shoulder at something in the sky, and she turned to look. She couldn’t see anything. “What?”

“Look at that pig flying past.”

She turned back to him, lips pursed, and he laughed. “Come on,” he said. “I have to take photos of the high school sports teams at two. I’d better get back.”

They stood and brushed off the sand, then started to walk slowly to his car.

“So you do want to go ahead with it then?” Tasha asked as they walked.

“I do.” They reached the car, and he paused and smiled down at her. “For eight days, we are officially dating.”

She grinned. “What fun.”
“Yeah.” His gaze lingered on her lips, and for a brief second she thought he was going to kiss her. Her heart picked up its speed, and her lips parted. But in the end, he hesitated, smiled, walked around to his side of the car, and got in.

Tasha slid into the passenger seat, surprised by the effect he’d had on her. Her heart still raced, and when her hand bumped his as they clipped in their seatbelts, the touch of his skin on hers sent the hairs rising on the back of her neck.

She looked out of the window as he started the car and eased it out onto the main road. Why did she feel awkward? She’d known him eleven years. Ever since she was thirteen, she and Maisey had hung around with Kole, Joss, Fox, and half a dozen of their other mates. There had always been jokes and semi-flirtatious, bawdy remarks, but none of it had ever been serious, and she’d tended to think of them all as older brothers.

Perhaps that was why she felt awkward then—because she’d finally removed that self-imposed barrier, and she was allowing herself to look at Kole in a different way. She’d always known he was tall, he worked out, and he was tanned and fit like all the other guys, because they all went surfing, played rugby, and visited the gym. But she’d never looked. Never admired. Never imagined her hands touching that tanned skin, feeling that sculpted muscle.

She glanced across at him, saw him temporarily lost in thought, and took the opportunity to cast her eye over him. He drove with one hand on the steering wheel and the elbow of the other arm on the windowsill, his fingers resting on his lips. His hair stuck up at the front. If she ran her hand up the back of his head, the short strands would feel prickly to her fingers. His arms were muscular, sprinkled with light brown hair. He was handsome, there was no doubt about it; in another life, in a sharp expensive suit and with groomed hair, he would look like an Italian model.

You still think of him like a boy, she thought, an eternal teenager, playing console games, ordering two huge burgers to her one, playing rugby in the garden, watching Die Hard a gazillion times. But he wasn’t a boy. Without her noticing, he’d grown up into a man, and a rather spectacular one at that.

And they’d just agreed to date for eight days.

You think you can handle that?

He glanced over at her and raised an eyebrow. “What?”
“Nothing.” She cleared her throat. “So. What’s the first step in this dating thing?” Her heart banged against her ribs.

“What would you like to do? Go to the cinema in Kerikeri? I’m not working tomorrow evening.” He returned his gaze to the road. His suggestion surprised her. She hadn’t expected that at all. After their frank talk about sex, she’d thought he’d invite her straight to his place and take the opportunity to jump her. The notion that he actually wanted to date was strangely…touching.

“Um, okay,” she said.

“I’ve no idea what’s on.”

“I’ll check tonight if you like and text you. Do you mind what we see? No cartoons obviously.”

“What do you mean? Shrek and Ice Age totally rocked.” That made her laugh. “Okay. Well I’ll try to pick something interesting. It’ll probably start around eight so it’ll mean leaving at seven—is that okay? I’ll confirm it later.”

“Sure. I’ll pick you up.” He glanced over and smiled.

The smile did something funny to her insides, and she looked out of the window again, cautioning herself. Kole had admitted to her quite frankly, I want that shop…and I’m going to get it. He was a clever guy, and he could be manipulative. He was going to do his best to use all his tricks on her, and show her how he won his women. She would have to be very careful not to succumb to his charm.

He turned off onto the road to the town of Mangonui, then headed for the café where she and Maisey worked. He pulled up outside and left the engine running.

“Okay,” he said. “Till tomorrow.”

“Till tomorrow.” She hesitated and bit her lip. Making a decision, she put a hand on his arm, moved forward, tipped her head to the side, and planted a soft kiss on his cheek. “See you later.”

“I look forward to it.” His voice was dry and amused.

Tasha got out of the car and ran up to the café, opened the door, and went inside. He drove off, the sound of the engine fading as he turned back onto the main road.

She walked behind the counter, then leaned on it for a moment and let out a long, slow breath. *Stop it,* she scolded her pounding heart. She wasn’t going to think about how firm his arm
muscle had been beneath her fingers, about the scrape of the bristles on his cheek across her lips as she kissed him, about the way the smell of his aftershave had wound around her, masculine and intoxicating.

She wasn’t going to think about it at all.
Chapter Four

Kole went home, picked up his gear, and headed for the high school, arriving at two thirty with plenty of time before school ended and the sports teams met for their photographs.

He called in at Reception first to pick up a visitors’ badge, and waited there for the sports administrator to come and fetch him. She arrived within a few minutes, a slender woman probably a year or so older than him, wearing a tracksuit and with her hair in a ponytail.

“Hey, Kole.”

He had taken all the sports teams’ photographs for the last couple of years, so he knew her well. “Hey, Lisa.” They shook hands.

“Come on, I’ll take you down.”

He walked with her through the school to the fields. They chatted as they walked, and when she took his arm to hold him back from a flying football as they exited the gym onto the field, he felt the grip of her fingers and the way she pressed against him, the subtle smell of her perfume.

She liked him. He’d thought that before, and he’d nearly asked her out six months ago when he came to photograph the winter teams, except he’d been dating someone else at the time. He couldn’t remember who. Her name began with a J. Janice? Jenny?

Anyway, Lisa was nice; friendly, chatty, pretty enough, maybe a little on the skinny side compared to…

He frowned as he realized who he’d been about to liken her to. Tasha was hardly his perfect woman. She was too short for a start, too abrasive, too confrontational. Much too feisty. He liked his women mild-mannered, submissive, and gentle, like a sparkler, not like a freaking rocket that frightened the life out of you when it exploded.

Still, he’d promised Maisey he wouldn’t date anyone else while this bet was on, and that was fair enough—he may get through women like other guys got through mints, but he never cheated on them.

He moved away from Lisa but continued to chat politely, and she seemed to take the hint and didn’t touch him again. He set up his camera in front of the benches, and when the school bell rang and the students joined them, he spent a pleasant enough hour organizing the teams and getting some decent photos of them for their school magazine.
Afterward, he said goodbye to Lisa and headed for his car. She gave him a lingering, wistful smile as he left, and he was tempted to suggest he contact her in a few weeks’ time, when this thing with Tasha was over. But he told himself to wait, and after putting his camera and tripod carefully in the boot, he drove home. He’d be busy enough for the next two weeks. He shouldn’t over-complicate matters.

When he arrived home, though, as he threw a ready meal in the microwave and poured a beer, he half-wished he’d at least given Lisa his number. This thing with Tasha obviously wasn’t going anywhere. For a start, he highly doubted she’d actually go through with the bet. Once she sat down and thought about it, she’d realize the whole thing was idiotic, hold up her hands in surrender, tell him she gave up, and the shop was his to keep.

He put the hot plastic pot of beef curry on a plate—why bother tipping it out when it meant having to wash the plate afterward?—and took it with his beer out onto the deck. He sat in his comfy deckchair, put his feet up on the wooden balustrade that ran around the deck, and started eating.

Yeah, she was going to chicken out, no doubt about it. She thought of him like a big brother, and he’d seen her watching him over the years while he went out with different girls, her eyes wide, slightly in awe of him. She’d be too nervous to actually go on a date, let alone go to bed with him. When it came down to it, she’d definitely back out.

Oddly, he felt disappointed at the thought. It would have been fun. He said I was insatiable. Kole’s lips curved, and he sipped his beer. He’d not yet met a girl with as high a sex drive as himself—even those who were enthusiastic in bed couldn’t keep up with him. Would Tasha have been able to? He’d probably never find out.

His mobile rang in his pocket, and he put down his beer, slid out the phone, and opened it up. He read the caller’s name and gave a little laugh. Speak of the devil...

He pressed the button and held it up to his ear. “Hey, Miss Wilde.”

“Hey yourself. What are you doing? Or shouldn’t I ask?” Her husky voice sent a tingle down his spine.

“Hey yourself. What are you doing? Or shouldn’t I ask?” Her husky voice sent a tingle down his spine.

He slid down a little in the chair and leaned his head on the back. “What do you mean? We promised we wouldn’t date anyone else while the bet’s on.”

“Actually, I thought you might be indulging in a little lone action.”

He grinned. “If you count eating curry as a lone action, then yes, absolutely.”
“I might. A good Madras has been known to bring on an orgasm.”

That made him laugh out loud. “You’re my kind of woman.”

“Interesting what kind of criteria you have.” She sounded amused. “I checked the cinema listings. The latest Bond movie’s on at eight tomorrow in Kerikeri.”

“Cool—I’ve been waiting to see that.”

“Yeah, me too.”

“I’ll pick you up at seven?”

“Sounds good. See you then.”

“See ya.”

He clipped the phone shut and shoved it back in his pocket. Then picked up his beer and sipped it as he looked at the view of Mangonui harbor. The early evening sun painted the water a dark gold, and a couple of fishing boats made their way back after a day spent out in the ocean catching snapper.

So, apparently she was still willing to go on a date at least.

Kole had joked about not holding back if they dated, but in truth he had no real tricks up his sleeve. Contrary to Tasha’s suspicions, he didn’t become another person when he entered into a relationship. There wasn’t a charm switch he could flick from off to on—more’s the pity! It was one person’s perception of another that changed. Up until now, he’d looked at Tasha as Maisey’s best friend and Fox’s sister. It was like being short of cash—you didn’t window shop when you couldn’t afford to buy. Of course he wasn’t a eunuch. When she wore a bikini on the beach, he’d noted her curvy figure and generous breasts, but after a brief glimpse he’d always made himself look away and think of his Aunt Edna and her wrinkled stockings, anything but how it might feel to cup Tasha’s breasts and feel her body against him.

Briefly, he thought of Fox. Had she told her brother what she was planning? Kole was extremely protective of Maisey, and from the beginning, when she was thirteen and he and his mates were seventeen, he’d made it very clear to all of them that Maisey was a no-go area with no exceptions, and they’d all obeyed that rule, as far as he knew. Did Fox feel the same way about Tasha? He didn’t think so. He couldn’t imagine anything riling the inimitable Fox—who thought only about cuts of lamb and herbs and different types of oil and a hundred other things in the kitchen about which Kole knew precisely nothing. Fox was obsessed with being a chef, and he worked twelve hours a day, six days a week. He’d never seemed concerned with what his
sister got up to. Still, Kole thought he might mention he was dating Tasha, if he bumped into him at some point.

The warm summer breeze brushed across his bare feet, ruffled his hair, and Kole sipped his beer and sighed, imagining what it might be like to have Tasha pressed up against him, willing and responsive to his touch. Would she really go through with it? A little part of him wondered if she were somehow leading him on, only to pull back at the last moment and taunt him if he showed any sign of attraction toward her. But that would be nasty, and although Tasha could be sharp and to the point, he’d never known her to be cruel.

No, he was going to have to act as if this were any normal date. The truth was that most women, excluding Tasha, seemed to enjoy his company, reacted well when he showed them some attention, and appeared eager to get him into bed. He’d just be himself, and if that didn’t work on her, well, maybe she was immune to his charm.

He closed his eyes and imagined pulling her into his arms, running his hands down her body, filling his palms with her breasts. He didn’t mind women being forward in bed. He remembered Tasha’s words about her ex: *He wasn’t keen on me making suggestions in the bedroom. He saw it as a criticism of his masculinity.* Well, whatever she suggested, he’d let her go for it. It was hardly a long term affair anyway, and she might actually be able to teach him something. He wasn’t too much of an egotist to assume he knew everything there was to know about women and their desires.

And…now he had an erection, thinking about Tasha and what she might want to do to him behind closed doors. He sighed and rose to go inside. Time for a shower and a little bit of lone action.

The real performance would have to wait.

* 

At just before seven the next day, Kole pulled up outside the house Tasha and Maisey shared and turned off the car’s engine. He got out and walked toward the house, then knocked on the door.

As he waited, he wondered what sort of outfit she might wear on a date. He couldn’t remember seeing her in anything except black, stone, and khaki, and the last time she’d worn a skirt had been at Harry’s funeral. His mind conjured up a scarlet mini skirt, a sequined boob
tube, and black high heels. That made him laugh, and he was still laughing when the door opened and Maisey appeared.

“Hey.” She blinked as she saw him laughing. “What’s so funny?”

“You don’t want to know. Tasha there?”

“Yeah, she’s coming.” His sister studied him with narrowed eyes. She was the polar opposite of her best friend. Maisey always wore extremely girly clothes and spent an inordinate amount of time on her hair and nails. That evening she wore jeans and a tight white T-shirt with silver thread running through it, and she had a row of silver butterfly clips in her dark hair. “I feel like I should give you The Talk,” she said, coming out and pulling the door closed behind her.

“The Talk?” He raised his eyebrows.

“You know what I mean. Be polite, good manners, treat her nice, blah blah.”

He glared at her. “What do you think I’m going to do? Jump her in the car on the way to the flicks?”

“I wouldn’t put it past you.”

“I’m a gentleman.”

“Yeah. You’ve never had a one-night stand.”

He opened his mouth to object, but at the look in her eyes, his protest faded.

“Thought as much,” she said.

“That doesn’t mean I’d do it to Tasha. I like her. She’s a good friend. And anyway, Miss Pride-and-Prejudice, this is the twenty-first century, and we’re talking about Tasha. Who’s to say she’s not going to jump me on the way?”

Maisey thought about it. “Good point.” They both smiled. Then she dug at a clod of earth with her toe. “Still. Be nice, eh? I know she can be a pain, and I know you really want the shop, but don’t…”

“Don’t what?”

She met his gaze. “Break her heart.”

He laughed. “That’s the last thing that’s going to happen here. It’s much more likely she’ll break my kneecaps.”

Her lips curved. “Yeah, you’re probably right.”

A voice sounded from behind her, and she turned and pushed open the door. “He’s here.”
Tasha appeared behind Maisey and slipped past her to stand in front of him. “Hey, sorry, I didn’t hear you pull up.”

“Hi.” He smiled at her. She wasn’t wearing a boob-tube or a mini skirt. But the jeans were gone, and instead she wore a pair of wide-legged black slacks and a stone-colored T-shirt with a lowish round neck. She still wore her hair up in a knot, but a few strands curled around her face—Maisey’s doing, no doubt. Also, to his surprise, she was wearing fancy shoes—a classy pair of simple black high-heeled sandals.

“You like nice.” He bent and kissed her on the cheek.

“Thanks. You too.”

He looked down at himself—he’d chosen black jeans and a short-sleeved navy shirt she’d once complimented him on. “Thanks.”

“Wow,” Maisey said. “You’re both being civilized. I’m tempted to phone Mr. Guinness.”

Kole ignored her and held out his arm toward Tasha. “Miss Wilde?”

“Thank you, Mr. Graham.” She took his arm, and to Maisey’s laughter, they walked down to the car.
Chapter Five

Tasha slid into the passenger seat and buckled her seatbelt.

Her heart pounded, and she felt strangely breathless as he got in the driver’s side and turned on the engine. He looked across at her and smiled before moving the gearstick into drive and heading onto the main road.

“You look nice,” he said again before she could say anything. “Those wide-leg trousers suit you.”

“Thank you.”

“And heels!” He looked at her and widened his eyes before turning his gaze back to the road. “I’ve never seen you in heels.”

She looked down at her feet, turning them to see the three-inch heels. “I can’t remember the last time I wore them.”

“Are you trying to impress me?” He had a twinkle in his eye as he glanced at her.

She gave him a sarcastic look. “I didn’t want us to look like Mike and Sully from Monsters Inc. You are quite a bit taller than me.”

He laughed. “True.”

“You look nice too,” she admitted again.

His lips curved. “Thanks.”

She let her gaze linger on him. He’d showered and smelled of spicy body wash and fresh clean male, and his hair was a little damp around the ears and the back of his neck, suggesting he hadn’t bothered to dry it with a hairdryer. The stubble he often sported had vanished, and his cheek and jaw looked lean and smooth. He wore tight jeans that emphasized his rather attractive butt. Okay, she thought as her cynical self laughed, she had noticed, but that was allowed as they were officially on a date. And he also wore her favorite shirt of his. Had he chosen that on purpose because he knew she liked it? The thought made her soften a little.

He glanced back at her, obviously aware she was studying him, and grinned. “Are you weirded out?”

“A bit,” she admitted. But probably not in the way he thought. Not because it felt odd to be with him, one of her best friends, out on a real date where anything could happen. But because she was extremely conscious of him as a man. Being in a car with a guy was strangely intimate.
Her thigh rested close to his, and when she leaned her elbow on the rest, their upper arms brushed. She’d never made out with anyone in a car, but she could totally see why it happened so often. Nobody could hear them. They were isolated in their own little world.

*And nobody can come to your rescue if you scream,* her subconscious pointed out. But she blew a raspberry at it. Kole was hardly going to pull over into a layby and jump her without her permission.

Briefly, she wondered whether she’d give her permission if he did pull over and ask to jump her. If she said yes, would he somehow maneuver her in the front, so to speak? Or would they get into the back, maybe with her on top? Dammit, she should have worn a skirt. It would have made it easier to sit astride him, and then he’d be able to pull aside her panties and slide right inside…

“Penny for them,” Kole said.

She blinked and focused. For maybe the first time in her life, she actually felt embarrassed at where her thoughts had been heading. Her face grew warm. *Oh my God, I’m blushing like a Jane Austen virgin.* She was so unused to the feeling that it made her even more self-conscious, and the heat intensified.

Kole’s gaze moved to her, returned to the road, then came back in a comical double-take. He stared at her for so long she thought he might drive into the ditch.

To her utter surprise, though, he didn’t comment on the way her cheeks were doing an impression of an erupting Mount Vesuvius. Instead, he moved his gaze back to the road and concentrated as they pulled up at a T-junction.

“I read a review of the movie,” he said, turning left. “It sounds pretty amazing. The best Bond yet, they’re saying.”

“Yeah, I’m really looking forward to it.” She fought not to fan her face, puzzling over his reaction. She’d been so sure he’d mock her. Tasha Wilde, blushing? Ye gods! He, Joss, Fox, and the rest of their mates had teased the girls relentlessly all through their teens, so she was used to every minor flaw being pointed out—the sight of a VPL, a new pimple, the first time she used lipstick. They never seemed to understand it was polite not to point these things out and make a girl self-conscious.
So why hadn’t he said anything? Hell, he couldn’t have missed the blush, her cheeks had burned like beacons lit to warn of invading armies. That meant he was respectfully ignoring her embarrassment.

What had happened? Had she somehow slipped into an alternate universe?

He continued talking about other Bond movies and who played the best Bond, and gradually her cheeks cooled as she gave her opinion that yes, Daniel Craig probably topped the list, although Sean Connery received additional points for being so cool. But inside, she wasn’t sure whether to be grateful to Kole or resentful. By not teasing her, he’d somehow gained a strange sort of power over her. He’d seen her blush but chosen not to mention it. Was that all part of his plan to win the bet? Was this part of his charm—to act gentlemanly rather than tease her like he would have done if they weren’t on a date?

She should move on, forget it had happened. But she couldn’t. It bothered her he’d acted different than usual.

“I blushed,” she blurted out, interrupting his discussion of who made the best Batman.

He glanced at her, and his mouth curved up. “I noticed.”

She frowned. “So why didn’t you say anything?”

“It didn’t seem appropriate to draw attention to it.”

“But usually you would have,” she argued. “If we weren’t on a date, you would have teased me about it.”

“No, I wouldn’t.”

“Yes, you would.”

“Okay, I would, but we are on a date, and therefore it wasn’t the polite thing to do.”

“See!” She pounded the dashboard. “I knew you acted differently when you were dating, and this is proof.”

She’d thought he’d look annoyed or insulted, but instead he just laughed. “Yeah, I guess.”

When she gritted her teeth though, he sighed, indicated, and pulled the car over into a layby.

He left the engine running but turned in the seat to look at her, unclipping his belt. “Okay, we need to get this sorted.”

“Are you going to jump me?”

He looked exasperated. “What? What are you talking about? We’re on a first date!”

“You’ve never had a one-night stand?”
“I’ve never pretended to take a girl to the cinema and then pulled over to give her one on the way, if that’s what you mean.” His eyes were hard, wounded.

It wasn’t what she meant, but she could see she’d insulted him. That was interesting. She’d thought he was so without scruples that he was uninsultable. Okay, that might not actually be a word, but she’d been so certain he was it, whatever it was.

And now she’d hurt his feelings and made him angry. He was looking away, out through the windscreen, shaking his head and giving a little humorless laugh. Guilt hollowed her out inside, and she bit her lip.

“I’m sorry,” she said softly. “That was insulting and unfair.”

He huffed a sigh, then looked back at her. His hazel eyes had softened a little. “Normally you wouldn’t have apologized,” he observed. “You wouldn’t have cared if you’d offended me.”

She opened her mouth to protest, then closed it again slowly. He was right. Their banter had always been such that she’d tease him and say rude things to rile him, but they never did, because he’d always have a comeback. Something had changed between them. He cared what she thought of him. And she cared she’d upset him.

“When we decided to date,” he said, echoing her thoughts, “it did something to our relationship. It’s like we’ve been two volatile compounds in test tubes that have finally been tipped into a beaker and allowed to mix. And soon, if things go as I plan them to, those compounds are going to get heated.”

Tasha’s mouth went dry. His eyes had turned intense, and she was very aware of how close they were sitting. The scent of his aftershave, the heat from his body, the fact he seemed bigger than her, his arms so brown and muscular where he leaned on the back of her seat, almost around her, but not quite.

“There’s going to be a chemical reaction,” he said, tipping his head a little, looking right into her eyes. “And when that happens, it changes things on a molecular level. And they can’t be unchanged. At the moment, we could probably scrape ourselves back into our separate test tubes without too much harm done, but after heat’s applied, we won’t be able to do that. And you can’t sit here thinking we can. Yes, we’ll act differently while dating and after dating, because you can’t interact like that and remain the same. It’s not a question of ‘turning on the charm’ or whatever you think happens. We react to each other, and with each other. But things will be different. And you have to be prepared for that.”
She swallowed and moistened her lips. His gaze dropped to them, and they parted involuntarily as she inhaled. The car seemed charged with electricity—it ran through her, across to him and back, raising all the hairs on her body, tightening her nipples, making her heart race.

She hadn’t thought of it like that. She’d assumed they would be two good mates dating, teasing each other, awkward and laughing in bed, the knowledge permanently in her head that he was her friend, he was Kole, and she hadn’t thought she’d be able to get past that.

Now she realized how naïve, how foolish she’d been. Of course having sex was going to change things.

“Can you deal with that?” he murmured. “Because, if not, perhaps we should just turn around and go home.”

She should end it now. If they carried on, he was right—things would never be the same again.

But as her gaze focused on his mouth, she felt a deep longing she hadn’t expected, a dark desire to have this man, to taste a little of that danger that hovered in the air around him like smoke.

“I don’t want to stop,” she said, rewarded by a lifting of his frown, a spark in his eyes. “But I don’t want to lose you either. I’m worried that afterward we won’t be friends. And I don’t think I could bear that.”

He smiled. “We’ll always be friends, Tasha Wilde. Don’t you worry about that. How could I not have you in my life?” He looked sincerely puzzled at the thought.

Tasha wasn’t so sure. How could they stay friends if they went through with this? But still, she couldn’t back away. He was like a magnet, and she was the iron filings slowly being drawn toward him.

“Oh, okay,” she said quietly.

They sat for a moment, looking at each other in the fading light. Outside, a kiwi bird cried from somewhere in the bush. A car went past, headlights scanning the tarmac, and then the road fell quiet again.

“You’re sure?” he said.

She nodded.

Their gazes met. And slowly, they both smiled.
He tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, then slid his fingers along to her neck, cupping her cheek in his warm palm. His thumb brushed her cheekbone, sending tingles up her spine.

Tasha’s heart pounded. He was going to kiss her. His eyelids had fallen to half mast, and his gaze was fixed on her mouth. She wanted him to kiss her. Oh God, she wanted him to kiss her.

He leaned forward. She moistened her lips again, and held her breath.
And then at the last minute, he turned his head and his lips touched her cheek.
He pulled back, dropping his hand, and his eyes were filled with laughter.
Tasha pushed him away, exasperated, breathless, yearning, and cross all at the same time.
“Come on, or we’ll be late,” she snapped.

He clipped in his seatbelt and put the car into drive, then moved back onto the road, still laughing. “Save it for later,” he promised, and reached across to take her hand in his.

Tasha let him. But she still scowled, all the same.
Chapter Six

They kept the talk lighthearted for the rest of the journey, but it took a while for Tasha’s heart to stop racing. She couldn’t believe how, at that moment when he’d cupped her cheek and leaned close, she’d longed so much for him to kiss her. She hadn’t expected such yearning, not for Kole, the guy who usually prompted an urge to strangle more than smooch, and when he’d kissed her cheek and pulled away, the disappointment and physical ache he left behind had shocked her.

She kept it to herself, though. He probably had an idea how she was feeling anyway. He’d seen her blush, so she was pretty sure he’d also spotted her heaving chest, rapidly blinking eyes, and the way she’d shifted in her seat to try and dispel the ache between her thighs. But once again, he’d said nothing, just changed the subject, and left her feeling unnerved and confused by his unexpected kindness.

They arrived at Kerikeri with about ten minutes to spare, and Kole bought their tickets, pushing Tasha’s hand away when she pulled out her card to pay her share. Not wanting to fight with him in public, she waited until they’d walked away carrying their drinks and popcorn to berate him.

“You shouldn’t have paid for me,” she whispered furiously as they turned the corner from the kiosk and walked up the steps toward the screens.

He looked genuinely confused. “Why?”

“Because A, we’re not really dating, and B, I don’t believe in it.”

He handed the tickets to the girl on the door, tucked the receipts back in the pocket of his jeans, and led the way into the cinema. “Firstly,” he said, walking all the way up the steps to the back, “we are really dating.”

“No, we’re not.”

“We’ve already had this conversation, and yes we are, otherwise why would I be heading for the back seats to make out?”

She stared at him as he reached the top of the steps and walked past those already seated to two spare seats. Mumbling under her breath, trying to ignore the way her stomach fluttered at the thought of cuddling up to him in the dark, she followed him along and sat beside him. “I’m not making out with you in the back row of the cinema,” she muttered. “We’re not fourteen.”
“More’s the pity.” He put a handful of popcorn in his mouth and crunched. “And secondly, what’s wrong with a guy paying for a date?”

“It’s unethical,” she said, prompting a snort from him. “I believe women and men should be equals.”

“So do I.”

“Then—”

He gave the kind of sigh she’d been used to all her life, full of impatience and exasperation. “A woman doing the same job as a guy should be paid the same wage. They should have every opportunity available to them that guys have. Gender, sexuality, color, race—they should all be irrelevant. But…” He held up a finger as she went to interrupt. “After saying that, I think it would be a very sad place if everyone acted the same and looked the same. You’re a girl. I’m a guy. I like that there’s a difference. And I don’t see anything wrong with men acting like gentlemen and women acting in a ladylike fashion.”

Now it was Tasha’s turn to snort. “You think I should start carrying a parasol and wear petticoats and have fainting fits?”

He tipped his head. “Well…” She glared at him, and he grinned. “Obviously not. But I don’t see the problem with opening the door for a woman, giving her my seat, or paying for a date, because I was brought up to be polite. How is that sexist?”

She sighed, because she didn’t really have an answer. “I suppose some women would say it means you see them as the fairer or weaker sex, meaning you’re assuming we can’t stand up for long enough, or we need a man to pay for us. Some women are offended by that.”

“Are you?”

She looked up at the screen. The adverts had started and the lights had dimmed slightly, but people were still making their way along the rows. “I don’t like it when men make assumptions about my abilities. But equally, I understand it’s a difficult world out there for guys sometimes. Our roles aren’t as clearly defined anymore, and it would be wrong to accuse a guy of sexism when he thought he was being polite.”

“So therefore you admit it was okay for me to buy the tickets?”

“It just makes me laugh to hear you call yourself a gentleman.”

“I’m a perfect gentleman. Usually.”
“Usually being the operative word. I have no doubt you are a gentleman when you’re on a
date. But I’ve not seen much sight of it around me.”

Everyone had taken their seats, the lights were dimming further, and the final advert came
to an end. She thought the conversation had ended and curled her legs under her, ready to watch
the movie. But as it grew dark, Kole leaned towards her and murmured in her ear.

“Did you ever consider that sometimes people can’t show their true feelings for someone?
So they hide them behind a veneer of camaraderie and pretend nothing deeper exists.”

She looked up at him, seeing his eyes gleaming in the light from the screen. He wasn’t
smiling, and a shiver ran through her. What was he saying? That he liked her, had always liked
her? But he’d ignored it because they were friends?

He lifted his arm and hovered it above her. She let her lips curve and leaned against him,
and he lowered his arm around her shoulders and tightened it momentarily, his hand warm on her
arm. She fixed her gaze on the screen, too confused, in too much of an emotional whirl to say
anything else. And besides, the movie had started, so there wasn’t any point in trying to speak
over the car chase and all the explosions.

True to his words, Kole remained a gentleman for the rest of the movie. He went out at one
point and bought her another drink, and he didn’t try to kiss her.

But his arm stayed around her for the entire film, and she half-watched and half-dreamed
as she curled up to him, comfortable in his embrace, conscious of the smell of his body wash, the
feel of his muscular chest beneath her fingers when she rested her hand there, the line of his jaw
not far from her mouth. She only had to move a little and she’d be able to plant a kiss there.

She didn’t, though. As Bond shot and rolled and blew up buildings, she snuggled up to
Kole and let her mind play on his words. Sometimes people can’t show their true feelings for
someone... They pretend nothing deeper exists. Had there been more between them than
friendship all this time? Had they ignored their feelings because they were all supposed to be
friends?

Her mind spun, and she felt confused. She had to remember that although he’d protested
this was a real date, it wasn’t. It couldn’t be. This relationship, or whatever you called it, had a
use-by date, and its very purpose was to try and force the other person to admit they had feelings
for them. She’d made the bet because she’d felt confident of arousing some affection in Kole
without falling for him herself, so she had to be careful to remember that when he said nice things. He was only trying to do the same.

Still, his words gave her a tingle that reappeared every time she thought about them.

When the movie finished, they went back to the car, and Kole drove them back to Mangonui. They talked all the way, about the actor playing Bond, about whether it was the best Bond film as everyone was saying, about their other favorite movies and what series they liked to watch.

And as the minutes slipped away, Tasha realized she enjoyed Kole’s company very much. She’d always known he was funny, clever, sharp, and witty, but in a group he bounced off Joss and the others for much of the time, purposely playing devil’s advocate or saying outrageous things to start a conversation or to make everyone laugh.

On his own, though, he was different; he was still funny, wry, and smart, but for the first time maybe ever she saw the real him, thoughtful, kind, hard as he spoke about his dislike of drugs and the problems facing teens growing up nowadays, ambitious when he spoke a little about his photography business and where he wanted to take it in the future.

“What?” he asked, obviously conscious of her watching him as he took the turn for Mangonui. By the direction he was going, he was obviously heading for the house she shared with Maisey, not his own home. He wasn’t assuming she’d go to bed with him on the first date. Yet again, he’d surprised her.

“I’m trying to work out which is the real you,” she said softly. “You’re quite a puzzle.”

He indicated and turned again, then glanced over at her. “We’re all like dice with six different sides. Everyone changes their face depending on who they’re with. Loud with your mates, respectful with your grandparents, charming with the girls, efficient with your boss. That’s quite normal.”

“I suppose so. I hadn’t thought of it like that before.” She watched him pull up outside her house. “Do I change like that?”

He put on the handbrake and turned off the engine. The sounds of a warm Northland night filled the car—the singing of cicadas off in the bush, a faint folksy jazz music filtering through from an open window, the call of voices in the harbor guiding in a late boat.

“Perhaps not as much as other people do,” Kole said. His gaze caressed her face. “With Maisey and everyone else you’re spirited, energetic, warm, determined.”
It was odd seeing herself through his eyes. He thought she was warm? Men had sometimes called her cold and hard. His words made her glow.

“With your mum you’re slightly different,” he said. “More closed up. You think more about what you say when you’re with her, as if you have to vet everything before it comes out.”

She nodded slowly. “That’s true.”

The only light came from the moon, waxing and nearly full, casting the car in its silvery beams. It bleached the color from the world and turned it monochrome, as if they’d been transported into an old black-and-white movie. He was Laurence Olivier, Tasha thought, and she was Vivien Lee.

“And with you?” she murmured. “What am I like with you?”

“Cautious. Watchful. I feel like I’m handling a volatile metal.” He smiled. “I supposed that’s to be expected, considering. But still, you should come with a warning label. ‘Treat with Caution.’”

She didn’t want to think about the bet at that moment. Something was sparking between them, and his eyes were intense. There was magic in the air, and she wanted a little piece of it.

As she opened her mouth to say something, though, he turned, opened the door, and got out of the car. A wave of disappointment washed over her, and she got out awkwardly in her heels, embarrassed she’d assumed the evening wasn’t yet over.

“I don’t need walking to the door,” she said sharply as he rounded the car and started up the path, holding out a hand to her.

He turned, walking backwards, still holding out his hand. “I was hoping to kiss you goodnight. Unless you object?” He raised an eyebrow.
Chapter Seven

Tasha’s heart picked up its pace again, and she swallowed with a sudden onslaught of nerves as she took his hand.

“It depends,” she said as saucily as she could manage, conscious of his warm fingers on hers. “Are you only going to kiss me on the cheek again?”

He slowed as they reached the house, and his lips twisted. “No. That was a mistake. It gave me a hard-on for about three hours.”

“Me too.”

He laughed, pulled her toward him, and turned her so she could lean on the wall of the house. Smooth, she thought, moderately impressed with the maneuver. He moved closer, imprisoning her against the wall. Okay, let’s see what you’ve got.

A bout of nerves made her mouth go dry, and she swallowed, tucked her hands under her butt, and tried to stay calm. Was Kole nervous? He didn’t seem it. Even though she wore heels, he towered over her, all height and breadth and masculinity.

She held her breath as he slipped his hand around to cup the back of her head. His other hand rested on her hip and tightened. Her chest rose and fell rapidly with her quick breaths—was he aware? She didn’t want him to know he was having this effect on her, not when he seemed so relaxed. Damn the man, he must do this so often it didn’t cross his mind he might do something wrong like clash her teeth or have horrid breath. Thank goodness she’d had a mint on the way home in the car. Her mind whirled with a hundred different thoughts as he dipped his head, and she struggled to focus. Concentrate, Tasha!

His breath whispered across her lips, minty like hers, warm and sweet. Then he paused.

“Are you sure about this?” he murmured, touching his nose to hers in an affectionate Eskimo kiss. “A kiss changes everything.”

She wanted to yell Yes! Kiss me! But she didn’t want to give him the satisfaction of seeing her desperation. Instead, she moistened her lips. “I can see how sex would change everything,” she said, lifting her chin, “but a kiss? You’re not that good.”

His mouth curved a little. He brushed her cheek lightly with his thumb, barely touching it at all, but every hair on her body rose at the contact. “That’s not what I meant. A kiss is like Christmas Eve. Full of promise.” Their lips were almost touching, and hers tingled, as if their
shadows had moved that last fraction of an inch to meet. “Once you see that stocking full of presents,” he continued softly, “it’s very difficult not to open one.”

Every cell in her body ached for him to touch her. Had he planned this? If so, she was full of admiration, because he certainly knew how to make a woman beg. “Kole…” she whispered. She couldn’t bring herself to say yes, but she hoped the yearning showed in her eyes.

His thumb brushed her bottom lip. “Okay.” He moved the last inch toward her, and then he lowered his lips to hers.

They were warm and dry, and he pressed soft kisses across her mouth from corner to corner, feather-light, slow, gentle, and undemanding. Still, her heart thundered, and she closed her eyes, letting him kiss her, feeling the heat of his body against her, his chest touching her breasts, his hips brushing hers. His fingers tightened a little in her hair, holding her there, telling her not to move away. His other hand slid from her hip around to her lower back, but stayed respectably above her butt.

It was so unexpected. She’d thought he’d turn the dial up to eleven and launch straight into a full smooch, tongues and all, and she’d been half-prepared to be insulted, to push him away, to tell him to slow down. But this…this caress of her lips…she hadn’t expected this.

He kissed slowly up her cheekbone, around to her ear, tucked a strand of hair behind it, then touched his lips to the skin beneath the lobe, a gesture that seemed so intimate, she was unable to contain a shiver. She tensed, knowing he’d notice, and wondered if he’d laugh and tease her.

Am I getting to you, Wilde?

But he didn’t. He lifted his head and looked into her eyes. “Want me to stop?”

She studied his hazel eyes, seeing the moonlight reflected as a strip of silver through his irises. She knew his face so well, and yet she didn’t really know it at all. Up close, she could see a couple of scars on his cheek that he must have incurred from childhood chickenpox or something similar, usually hidden beneath his stubble. His eyelashes were girlishly long, framing eyes that held more emotion than she’d noticed before. Now they showed genuine concern, and something else, something she hadn’t expected to see.

Desire.

She ought to make a joke to lighten the situation, to show him she was unaffected by his closeness. She had to keep the upper hand in this relationship, especially this early on. She couldn’t let him think for a moment he stood a chance with the bet. Because he didn’t. This
wasn’t anything to do with emotions. This was all physical, and there was nothing wrong with being turned on by a hot guy kissing you in a very sexy way. Even if he was supposed to be your best mate.

So she gave a tiny shake of her head.

“Good,” he said, his voice husky. He moved a little closer, blocking out the moonlight, casting her in shadow, then bent and touched his lips to her jaw. He kissed up her cheek, across her closed eyelids, down her nose, and finally back to her mouth.

This time he held the kiss longer, and as his lips pressed against hers, she brought her hands from behind her back and rested them on his chest, feeling the defined muscles there as she traced her fingertips across his shirt. He felt warm, real, solid, and she realized she’d missed this, being close to someone, touching, and being touched back.

In the background, whoever was playing the music changed the song, and slow, sensual guitar playing ensnared her, sending her senses spinning into the warm December night. *Summer’s here,* her mind whispered, set free to dance around the lamplight like a moth. Kisses like this were made for early summer, holding such promise of heat to come.

Again, a little voice in her head murmured she should really pull back now and wish him goodnight, keep him hanging on, keep the upper hand. But the problem was that she didn’t want to stop. Not yet, not while he was still warming up. She wanted to see what else he held up his sleeve. If soft kisses like this were making her heart race, what would a proper kiss do?

She wanted more, but again, couldn’t bring herself to express the wish, to make the first step.

As if he’d read her mind, though, Kole brushed his tongue across her bottom lip with the lightest of touches. She was so keyed up by that point that she gasped, inhaling as desire shot through her. When her lips opened beneath his, he obviously took that as a good sign. He swept his tongue into her mouth, and with a moan of relief she raised a hand to slide into his short hair as he moved both arms around her.

He held her tightly, one hand between her shoulder blades, one at the base of her spine, pulling her close to him. Tasha’s fingers clenched in the short strands of his hair, her other hand sneaking around his back, clutching his shirt. He kissed her deeply, his tongue sliding against hers, teeth grazing her bottom lip as he gave a deep, approving growl low in his throat, so sexy it
made her feel faint—presumably, she thought as her internal muscles tightened, because all the blood in her body was rushing to somewhere other than her head.

Jeez, she hadn’t expected this! A small measure of panic mixed with the pleasure threading through her veins. She really hadn’t given this enough thought. She’d known he’d probably be great in bed. He had that confidence, that arrogance that announced he didn’t need a map to find his way around a woman’s body. He’d had lots of girlfriends she knew about and probably lots more she didn’t, so obviously her gender in general found him irresistible. But she hadn’t expected his charm, his allure, his magnetism, or whatever he wanted to call it, to work on her.

Behind the kiss, awareness of the bet they’d made hovered like a shadow. It would be there all the time—the feeling that he was doing his best to tease a reaction out of her, because he wanted the shop, and he wanted to win. But still, he wasn’t a cruel man. And she was perfectly aware it was possible to separate sexual desire from love. She was under no illusions he could want to win the bet but genuinely want to sleep with her at the same time.

So even though she knew she had to remain cautious, she let herself feel flattered by his desire, and aroused by his tender but demanding mouth and the way his hands tightened on her, as if he was fighting with himself not to let them travel over her body. And gradually, as he showed no signs of wanting this to be a fleeting embrace, or of laughing and teasing her about the way she kissed, she relaxed and opened up to him, melting against him. Her tongue played with his, and she pressed her breasts against his chest, reaching up onto tiptoes to enjoy it more.

Gosh, he was tall, and even though she’d seen him shirtless a dozen times each summer as they played rugby and cricket on the beach or swam in the sea, she hadn’t realized how firm his muscles were, or how he smelled so intoxicating. It was a humid evening, and his body had warmed his aftershave, filling her senses with the smell, taste, and feel of him. Her fingers itched to unbutton his shirt and slide beneath the cotton, to feel his skin, to run across his flat nipples, to graze down his back.

As if reading her mind, he raised his head a fraction to look at her, and his eyes were dark, filled with intense desire. His lips brushed hers, and his hands slid slowly down to rest on her butt.

“I want you,” he said, his voice deep and husky.

“Really?” The word was out before she’d vetted it. It sounded childish, pathetic, and needy, and she bit her lip, cursing herself, sure he’d find it funny.
But he didn’t laugh. He pulled her hips firmly against his, tightened his hands on her butt, then lifted her a little to settle his erection—obvious even through his jeans—into her soft mound.

He kissed her jaw, then around to her ear. “Can’t fake that,” he murmured, brushing his lips down her neck. She shivered, and he groaned. “Jeez, it drives me crazy when you do that.”

“Kole…” Her head was spinning. She needed to get a grip or she was going to melt into a puddle at his feet.

He kissed back up her jaw to her mouth, then gave her one final, long kiss before raising his head. “Can I see you tomorrow?” He released his tight grip on her, but still held her hips, maybe aware she felt unbalanced on her heels.

Not trusting her voice for the moment, she nodded.

“I’ll take you out to a restaurant,” he said, still standing close to her. Too close—she couldn’t think, couldn’t breathe. “My treat. No arguing. I’m going to feed you oysters and tiramisu and other aphrodisiacs. Top up your wine glass too much. Do my best to seduce you. And then afterward…” He kissed her nose. “We’ll see.”

She looked into his eyes. How right he’d been. Just the one kiss, and everything had changed. It had stripped away the playfulness of their relationship, the thin veneer that had held their emotions in check, and now she felt as if she’d been out in the sun too long—burned, raw.

He didn’t need aphrodisiacs. She was already seduced, already his. If he’d asked her to go back to his place with him, she would have said yes.

But he didn’t. And she wasn’t going to ask.

Instead, she said in a breathless voice, “I don’t like oysters.”

He laughed, his eyes crinkling at the edges, looking more like the old Kole. “Then I’ll think of something else.”

He held her gaze, reached out a hand, and touched the back of his fingers to her cheek.

“Catcha later.”

She fought the urge to kiss his fingers. “Yeah. See ya.”

He dropped his hand, turned, and walked back to his car, and she let herself into the house with a shaking hand, turning to give him a last wave as he pulled away.
Chapter Eight

Ten o’clock on Sunday morning found Kole walking along Mangonui waterfront, a takeaway coffee in his hand, the rays of the morning sun turning the water in the harbor to sparkling blue.

He had an appointment at eleven to take photos of a christening at a local church, and he had his equipment ready in the car. But first he had something he wanted to do.

With a few minutes to kill, he stopped in front of the shop he’d had his eye on since he’d heard the previous tenants had decided to move on. It was perfect, small but not too small, with a room he would set up as a studio for taking photographs so he’d be able to leave his equipment out permanently, plus a large area where he could have a reception desk and display examples of his work for interested customers to examine.

He’d already browsed through furniture catalogues and picked out the items he wanted, and he’d discussed a clean, smart, and professional décor with an interior designer who was chomping at the bit to get started. It was the ideal location, right on the waterfront, so he’d catch holidaymakers walking past who might decide to give themselves a lasting memory of their trip away, plus he’d generally be more visible for the local community.

And he’d been the first one into the estate agents, before the shop had been advertised. His name was even typed onto the lease. He just needed to meet the landlord when the guy eventually returned from his adventures in the rainforest to dot the i’s and cross the t’s.

Kole stared at the large windows of the shop and wondered exactly why he’d agreed to the ridiculous bet with Tasha. He should have said no—that the deal was done, he’d beaten her to the finish line, and entering into any sort of bet where he stood a chance of losing was a ridiculous idea.

Not that he thought he’d lose. Tasha was pretty, funny, and had a lot more going for her in the brain department than many of the girls he’d dated, but he’d never fall for her, not in a million years. He wouldn’t let himself. He wasn’t ready for a long term relationship. In fact, he might never be ready. The idea of settling down, of having responsibilities and commitments, didn’t appeal to him. Life was too short to spend his life worrying about keeping a wife happy, looking after kids, and panicking about making ends meet. If Harry’s death had taught him anything, it had taught him that at any moment his life could come screeching to a halt, and he
didn’t want to be lying on his deathbed thinking his days had been filled with mundane priorities that had held him back from doing whatever he really wanted to do. He liked being free and single, spending his money or saving it as he wished, going on exotic holidays, watching whatever he wanted on the TV, and not having to please anyone but himself.

So no, he wasn’t worried about losing the bet. He’d had plenty of girlfriends, and at twenty-eight, hadn’t really fallen for any of them hard. He knew he always held a part of himself back in a relationship, and in fact several girls had complained about his refusal to let them in, following which he’d promptly dumped them. But he knew he could control his feelings, and so therefore even though he loved Tasha as a friend, he had no worries it would develop into anything more.

But after saying that… He turned to look at the harbor, and his mind strayed back to the previous night. It had been…unexpected. He’d made the bet because part of him had been annoyed at Tasha’s outrageous assumption that he would fall for her before she fell for him. He hadn’t actually thought either of them would do any falling. He fully expected, after the eight days were up, they’d both admit it had been a lot of fun but would go their separate ways while remaining good friends who’d had a great time with each other. She drove him nuts most of the time, but he’d always thought she was pretty beneath her dark-rimmed glasses and austere appearance, and he’d liked the idea of fooling around with her for a while.

But going out the night before had not been what he’d expected. Alone with her in the car, he’d been conscious of her presence, of the smell of her light, flowery perfume, the creaminess of her smooth skin against the stone-colored T-shirt, the swell of her breasts where the neckline dipped lower than usual, and the way her brown eyes had been cautious, obscuring her thoughts like fog on a winter’s evening.

Her blush had completely taken him by surprise, and although he wasn’t sure what had caused it, he knew it was something to do with him, and probably sexual in nature. That had stunned him, because he’d honestly expected her to be immune to him as a man. When he’d kissed her, he’d expected her to burst out laughing, to mock him incessantly for his moves, to taunt him and say *Is that it?* and other insulting comments.

But she hadn’t. She’d gone quiet, something Tasha never did, had shivered in his arms when he’d kissed the beautiful smooth skin beneath her ear, and had finally returned his kiss with a rising desire that had blown him away.
From the kind of comments she’d said occasionally about sex, he expected her to be fairly confident in bed. He’d initially assumed that if they actually made it to the bedroom, it might be a bit mechanical and awkward, with them both too self-conscious to let go and enjoy themselves.

Now, though, he wasn’t so sure. He was beginning to suspect they might light a few fireworks if they climbed beneath the sheets.

And that was one reason why he was standing there, trying to pluck up the courage to walk to the place a few doors down from the shop they were competing for—the restaurant called Aqua Blue that belonged to her brother, Fox. He’d known Fox since school, liked and respected the guy, and because of his own strict instructions to his mates about Maisey being a no-fly zone, he had to admit to feeling a little guilty about the kind of things he kept fantasizing about doing to the guy’s sister.

Sighing, he walked up to the restaurant and knocked on the door.

Aqua Blue didn’t open until midday, but Fox would already be in the kitchens, getting ready. Fox lived for his restaurant and was obsessed with food and its preparation. Even Kole, who usually ate microwave meals or noodles for dinner, knew the guy was destined for greatness with his skill, ambition, and drive.

A man walked toward him through the restaurant—one of the maître d’s that Fox employed to run the staff while he himself cooked the food. He opened the door and stepped back. “Hey, Kole. Coming in?”

“Fox’s in, I’m guessing?”

“Yeah, out the back.”

Kole nodded and slipped past him, and made his way through to the kitchens.

Fox stood at one of the pristine tables, cracking open the shells of several large crabs and placing the meat in a huge bowl. Tall and with short dark hair, he had the same, slightly exotic Eastern European look about him that Tasha had, and the same unusual mahogany eyes.

He looked up as Kole walked in. “Hey, man.”

“Hey. How are you doing?”

Fox nodded. “Good. Just making crab cakes.”

“They don’t look like any crab cakes I’ve ever had,” Kole said, thinking of the ninety-percent breadcrumb ones that came in a packet.

Fox just grinned. “What’s up?”
Kole shoved his hands in the pockets of his jeans. “Just passing.”

“Okay.” Fox scooped up the last pile of crabmeat and placed it in the bowl, then began chopping some flat leaf parsley with a knife that looked as if it could have had a starring role in Psycho. “Good to see you anyway.”

Kole fidgeted. Fox was in a world of his own, and would probably forget he was even there. He had to spit it out. “It’s about Tasha,” he said.

Fox scooped the chopped parsley into the bowl, then reached for a cut lemon and squeezed the juice over the crab meat. “Oh? What’s she done now?”

“Nothing, nothing. Not yet. It’s good, I mean, I thought, you know, we’re mates and all, it would be polite to ask you first…”

Fox glanced at him. “If you could talk in English rather than iambic pentameter, it might help with understanding what you want, exactly.”

Kole looked at his feet. “Do you have any objections if I date Tasha?”

Fox washed his hands and wiped them on a towel as he came over, frowning. “Sorry, what does that have to do with me?”

Kole gave him an exasperated look. “You’re her brother.”

“So?”

“Fox, seriously? You don’t care who she dates?”

Fox returned the exasperated look. “I care, but Tasha would tell me it’s none of my business, and she’d be right.”

“Even so…”

Fox put his hands on his hips. “Are you going to be nice to her?”

“Of course.”

“Treat her well?”

Kole scratched the back of his neck, wondering if the circumstances of their bet counted as treating her well. “Yes.”

“Then what do I care?” Fox turned away and began choosing from the bottles on the shelves. “I’m hardly shocked.”

“Yes, but I…” The words sunk in. “Wait, what do you mean? I thought you’d be surprised.”
“Why?” Fox turned back carrying a bottle of Worcestershire sauce and some Dijon mustard. “It was only a matter of time. She’s always been crazy about you.”

Kole stared at him. “She said that?”

“Well, no, not in so many words.”

Kole’s alarm died down. “So you came to this conclusion using all your recent relationship experience? When was the last time you dated anyone? 2002?”

Fox gave him a wry look as he plonked the bottles on the table, then went to the fridge and brought back a box of eggs. “I go out. Sometimes.”

“Dude, you work six days a week until at least ten p.m.”

“And that gives me a whole day to enjoy myself. Anyway, this isn’t about me. I know Tasha likes you. Come on, the two of you flirt every time you get together.”

Kole laughed at that. “We do not. We’re the least flirty people I know. We’re always arguing.”

Fox cracked two eggs simultaneously into a bowl. “Po-tay-to, po-tah-to.”

Now Kole was getting irritated. “For fuck’s sake.”

Fox looked at him, dumped the eggshells, and leaned on the table. “If you’re dating a girl, I would have thought knowing she’s always liked you would come as good news. So tell me why, exactly, you’re annoyed by that?”

Kole had painted himself into a corner. He shouldn’t have come. What was he looking for, permission to screw Tasha stupid for eight days then dump her? There was no way he could tell Fox about the bet, even if Tasha herself had come up with the idea. He decided to back off, and held up a hand. “I’m not annoyed. Only that I suppose I wish I’d realized she liked me sooner, and we wouldn’t have wasted time.”

Fox shrugged and cracked another two eggs. “Sometimes it takes a while for these things to mature. She’s only twenty-four, and you’re hardly claiming your pension.” He glanced up as he reached for the olive oil. “And to be honest, although I’ve always known you’re attracted to each other, I wouldn’t have picked you for her.”

The comment stung like a wasp. “Ouch.”

“Yeah, like you’re surprised by that,” Fox said. “You’re hardly long-term relationship material.”

“Even so…”
Fox sighed and stared at the bottle for a moment. “Tasha acts tough. Pretends she doesn’t care about her looks. Likes to think she doesn’t have emotions. But she’s not tough, she does care, and even though she tries to lock everything away in a steel box, she’s easily hurt.” He picked up a wooden spoon and pointed it at Kole. “I try not to get involved in her love life, but I’ll make an exception, as you’ve been kind enough to involve me. So. Break her heart, I’ll break your fucking legs.”


“Yeah. See you later.”

Kole walked out, nodding to the maître d’ as he passed. Outside, he walked slowly along the waterfront, trying to dispel the shiver of unease Fox’s words had cast over him.

He clenched his hands in his pockets. Everything was going to be all right. Tasha’s brother was completely off target. She hadn’t always liked him, she was tough as dried leather, and this whole bet thing was a lark between two grown adults who found each other sexy and were using it as an excuse to fool around. Neither of them was going to fall for the other—that wasn’t even in question. She’d always made it perfectly clear he frustrated the hell out of her, so there was zero chance he’d break her heart. Less than zero.

He stopped and looked back at the shop, and a surge of resentment made him grit his teeth. He wasn’t going to let Fox frighten him into giving up the place. For a start, he wouldn’t put it past Tasha to have put her brother up to it. He wanted that studio. This bet was fun and he was looking forward to getting down and dirty with Tasha, but that was as far as it went. The shop would be his, no matter what the consequences.
Chapter Nine

Tasha stood in front of her wardrobe and stared sullenly at her clothes.

It was five p.m., and she’d been standing there for nearly fifteen minutes, at war with herself over what outfit she should choose for her date with Kole that evening.

Half of her itched to wear something that would make his eyes light up. That would make him look at her not as Tasha the friend, but as Tasha the woman, something that would get his blood racing and ensure the evening ended the way she was hoping it would.

The other half of her wanted to slap herself across the face. Since when had she turned into her mother—something she had always promised herself would never, ever, happen? After the age of eight, when her parents had divorced, Tasha had watched her mother on many occasions spend hours preparing her body, choosing her outfits, and doing her hair and makeup as she got ready for dates with various rich men. She’d been flower girl at three of Laura Wilde’s weddings. And she’d hated it, despising her mother for placing more importance on her looks than on her intelligence.

Tasha did not choose her clothes with men in mind. She may not be Einstein, but she still put her mental capacity and her personality far above her physical appearance in terms of importance. She would never be interested in a guy who was only attracted to her because of the way she looked.

Still. In spite of all that, she was only human. Kole wasn’t going out with her because of the way she looked. The previous night he’d clearly been turned on by the kiss and the way things had unfolded, rather than because she wore a skirt that barely covered her panties and a see-through top. So if she now wore something a little more…daring, did that make her shallow?

At that point, Tasha’s mobile rung in her pocket. She fished it out of her jeans and flipped it open, then groaned at the sight of her mother’s name. Sometimes she thought Laura had a sensor that beeped whenever her daughter was trying on clothes.

Fighting the urge to press cancel, she answered the call. “Hello?”

“Tasha, dahling.” Her mother practically breathed the words. “How are you?”

“Good.” Tasha pulled an old green dress out of the wardrobe, stared at it, then put it back. “What do you want?”

“Well that’s a nice way to talk to your mother.”
Tasha took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I’m sorry. I’m in the middle of something, and I was a bit distracted. How are you?”

“I’m fine, thank you. What are you in the middle of?”

Tasha thought about lying, but somehow Laura always seemed to know when her daughter was evading an issue. “Choosing what to wear.”

“Ooh, what for?”

Tasha sighed. “I have a date tonight.”

“Good Lord.”

Tasha ground her teeth. “No need to sound so surprised.”

“Dahling, I’m thrilled. It’s been ages since you went out with a man. It can go rusty, you know.”

Tasha closed her eyes. Just kill me now.

“So,” Laura continued brightly, “who’s the lucky man?”

“Well, it’s just a friend actually. Nothing serious.”

“Kole?” suggested her mother.

Tasha opened her eyes and stared at her reflection in the mirror on the wardrobe. “What? Who told you?”

“Nobody. It was a dot on the cards, sweetie. Just a matter of time.”

“Before he worked his way through the female population of the Northland and got around to me, you mean?”

Laura laughed. “No, silly. He’s always had his eye on you, that much is obvious.”

A shiver passed through Tasha from the roots of her hair to the tips of her toes. “That’s rubbish.”

“Anyone with eyes can see the way he looks at you.”

Tasha’s mind whirled, but she refused to believe it. “Mum, seriously, you always see romance where there isn’t any.” Laura continually fell in and out of love, so clearly she had no idea what men were really thinking.

“So you’re dating, but you don’t think he likes you? Where’s the logic in that?”

Tasha didn’t want to explain the details of the bet with her. “Let’s just say it’s not serious.”

“So it’s just for sex then?”

“Mum!”
“Nothing wrong with that,” Laura said breezily.

“I know.” Tasha’s open attitude to sex was the one thing she’d been grateful to inherit from her mother. “Look, Mum, I really need to go. Did you want something?”

“I was going to ask if you wanted to come to dinner tonight with me and George, but obviously you’re going to be busy.” George was husband number four. To be fair to Laura, they had been married over five years now. A rich accountant, he was tall, good looking, a little rotund, and slightly more tanned than Tasha liked a man to be, but he treated Laura well, and she seemed happy enough.

“Do me a favor?” Laura asked. “Don’t wear black.”

“I like black.”

“I know. And it’s elegant and classy on most people. But you need color, Tasha dear. Wear something bright.”

“I don’t do bright.”

“For God’s sake, at least shave your legs, won’t you?”

“Yes, Mother. I promise to prepare myself appropriately before I expose myself to a man’s touch.”

“Good. Let me know how it goes.”

Tasha said goodbye and clipped the phone shut. She looked down at her legs. Part of her considered rebelling against her mother’s advice, but as much as she disliked changing herself for a guy, she didn’t want Kole running his hand up her leg and getting his fingers tangled in the hairs.

*Running his hand up my leg...* Tasha swallowed down a nervous lump in her throat and closed the wardrobe doors. She wasn’t going to think about what might happen later, or she’d get herself all worked up. And she wasn’t going to think about her mother’s words either. *Anyone with eyes can see the way he looks at you.* Laura was completely off track. Kole looked at all women like a dog looks at cooked turkey. She was nothing different.

She was going to take a shower and deal with the hair situation, and then she’d have another think about which outfit to wear.

*

Half an hour later, smooth and perfumed, she came out of the bathroom wrapped in her black toweling robe and went into the kitchen to make herself a coffee before she tackled her
clothes. She found the kettle already on the boil, and Maisey spooning coffee into the plunger and preparing two cups. Tasha hadn’t seen her since her date with Kole. Maisey had been in bed when she arrived home, and she’d gone out early that morning before Tasha had woken up.

“Hey.” Maisey gave her a smile. “Missed you last night. What time did you get in?”

“About eleven thirty. I’m guessing you were in bed by nine.”

“Nothing wrong with that.” Maisey always went to bed early. “Keeps me young and beautiful.”

Tasha smiled and leaned against the workbench. Her best friend certainly fitted that description today. Maisey wore a pretty pink and green flowery short dress that showed off her shapely legs, and she’d clipped up her dark hair with a mass of girlishly pretty matching clips.

“So where have you been all day?” Tasha asked.

Maisey poured the hot water into the plunger and stirred it. “I went to Whangarei to the chocolate factory there. Spent ages looking at their products. And I visited a few of the confectionery shops and coffee houses to look at the layout and décor. Had a great time. Came away with lots of ideas.”

“Excellent.”

Maisey was like a butterfly going from flower to flower—beautiful, light of heart, young in spirit, and gentle, but also flighty and unable to stick to one thing. She had never been short of ideas for their shop—she just lacked the ability to put them into practice. But that was where Tasha came in. Between the two of them, they would make Treats a huge success, she was sure.

Maisey poured the coffee and pushed a cup to Tasha, then surveyed her as she sipped her own. “So… How did the ‘date’ go last night?” She put air quotes around the word with one hand.

“Good.” Tasha sipped the coffee, burned her mouth, and cursed.

“Didn’t take you back to his place then?” Maisey grinned mischievously.

“No. He was quite…” She smiled. “A gentleman.”

“We are talking about my brother here, aren’t we?”

“I know. I was surprised as you.” Tasha frowned. “He said something interesting last night that made me think. I told him one reason I made this bet is because I want to see the Kole he presents to other women, because I’m sure he must be different to the brother of yours I see almost every day. I felt the Kole he shows them is some kind of fake person, because obviously I see the ‘real’ Kole, the one who’s not trying to get laid.”
“I get your point.”

“But he said that we’re all like dice, that we all have six faces. And we present a different face to our parents, for example, than we would present to our friends, our lovers, our bosses. That it’s a natural thing we all do, change ourselves to fit who we’re with. What do you think?”

Maisey considered it for a moment. “I suppose he’s right. To be honest, I did think it was unfair to criticize him for ‘turning on the charm’. I don’t think he does anything the rest of us don’t do when we’re with people we want to impress. We all do it with guys we like—flutter our eyelashes, lean forward, prop up the boobs, that sort of thing.”

“I don’t,” Tasha said.

Maisey gave her an appraising look. “No, I suppose you don’t. Actually, I don’t think I’ve ever seen you flirt with a guy, not in the way I do, anyway. Maybe that’s why you terrify them.”

Tasha stared at her. “I don’t terrify men.”

“Yes, you do. You have that glare that probably kills an erection at twenty paces.”

“I do not!”

“Oh, come on, you do and you know you do. You play on it, if anything. I know why—it’s all to do with your mother, and you needn’t scowl at me because I know it’s the truth, even if you don’t want to hear it. You don’t like the way Laura plays on her looks to get what she wants. You think that’s somehow false and shallow.”

“It is false and shallow.”

“No, not really. Laura’s not as clever as you, not as witty or sharp. We all use the talents we have. I’m the same. I’m not super-smart, and I can hardly impress with my encyclopedic knowledge. But men react to me when I give them that look, and so I play on it when I find someone I like.”

Tasha sipped her coffee and looked out of the window at the jacaranda trees in their garden with their distinctive lilac-colored flowers, but her mind mulled over Maisey’s words.

Did she really scare guys off? Was it wrong to want a guy to like her for her, to fall in love with her personality? Although the idea of romance irritated her in many ways, Tasha liked sex, liked men, and did want to get married and settle down, maybe even have kids eventually. Was it so terrible she didn’t want the relationship to be superficial, that she wanted it to have meaning? Perhaps because her mother’s relationships had always seemed to lack meaning. But the thought she reacted so strongly against any initial attraction that she frightened guys off shocked her.
“Aw,” Maisey said, startling her. “I didn’t mean to upset you.”

Tasha blinked. “You haven’t upset me.”

“I did, I know I did.”

“I…” Tasha bit her lip. “I just want someone to like me for me. That’s all.”

“I know. I’ve listened to Laura scolding you to lose weight and tart yourself up, so I completely understand why you act like you do. But, Tash, there’s nothing wrong with wanting to make yourself look pretty for someone. It doesn’t mean you’re shallow, or there’s something wrong with flirting. It’s fun. I mean, I don’t agree with leading guys on, I’d never do that, but if you’re dating someone and you know where it’s going, and you like them, it’s fun to push it a little, to tease them.”

Tasha studied her wordlessly. Dating had never been like that for her. When she saw a guy she liked and who seemed interested in her regardless of her austere appearance, she was always forthright and up front, making it clear what she was interested in without tiptoeing around the issue. Did that frighten guys off? Sure, she had been told she was direct, but guys seemed to like that.

You didn’t seem to frighten Kole off, her brain whispered, and she turned away as a small smile curved her lips. Kole liked her for her, and he’d certainly seemed attracted to her, judging by what she’d felt was going on in his jeans when he’d pressed against her.

As she went back into her bedroom and opened her wardrobe doors, Maisey’s and her mother’s words played on her mind.

It’s fun to push it a little, to tease them.

Anyone with eyes can see the way he looks at you.

She ran a hand along the coat hangers, fingers trailing across the mainly black and neutral colors before they came to rest on an outfit her mother had once bought for her, but she’d hardly worn.

Perhaps she should try something different for a change.
Chapter Ten

Kole pulled up outside Tasha and Maisey’s house and turned off the ignition.
He sat there for a moment, looking across the street from their house at the park opposite. It was seven p.m. and the swings in the children’s playground were empty, moving slightly in the evening breeze, all the kids indoors for their evening baths and bed. The swings looked forlorn without their young companions, somehow echoing his odd, uneasy mood.

It was Fox’s fault, he mused glumly, watching an old crisp packet tumbling through the grass. This thing with Tasha was supposed to be a bit of fun, but her brother had cast a shadow over it with his threats of breaking limbs in response to broken hearts. Kole couldn’t help but feel annoyed at her for playing a part in his current state of mind, for suggesting the bet in the first place.

Even as the resentment filtered through him, though, it morphed quickly into guilt. It wasn’t Tasha’s fault. His low mood hadn’t only been caused by Fox’s unusually brotherly display of protectiveness.

After he’d visited Aqua Blue, Kole had gone to the church to take photographs of the christening. He knew the family—the baby’s father was an older brother of Stuart, a guy Kole had gone to school with. He’d met both the baby’s parents on several social occasions, including Stuart’s own wedding, and again, sadly, at the funeral of Stuart’s childhood sweetheart just eighteen months before. Ria had been diagnosed with Lupus, an autoimmune disease, at sixteen, and she’d regularly suffered from painful flares that affected her joints so much she was occasionally confined to a wheelchair. Stuart had known this, but he’d married her anyway, too in love to let the illness come between them, even though most times Kole had seen them together she’d been unwell. They’d talked often of kids and growing old together, but unbeknown to them both the Lupus had weakened her heart, and her sudden death at the age of twenty-four had shocked everyone.

Kole took photographs of the smiling parents with their baby and all their happy friends and family, but he’d been conscious all the while of Stuart standing to one side, quiet and alone. The guy had smiled and talked every time someone had come over to see him, but Kole, with a photographer’s eye, had watched him when Stuart thought nobody was looking, and the man’s pain and loss had been as evident as if it were paint splashed across his face. And afterward,
when everyone went back to the couple’s house for lunch, Stuart had made his excuses and departed alone.

The whole event had left Kole with an odd mixture of feelings. Sorrow for Stuart, and a strange anger at the unjustness of it all, the fact there seemed no logic regarding who God chose to let live and who He chose to take. If in fact He existed at all. Kole wasn’t so sure after seeing Stuart’s sad face.

He felt confused as to why anyone would let themselves fall in love so much they opened themselves to that kind of pain. *That* was why he kept his heart out of relationships, he told himself; that’s what Harry’s death had taught him.

But he’d also felt an unusual pang of envy at the sight of the couple with their baby, an emotion he was completely unaccustomed to, especially where babies were concerned. Probably not to do with the baby itself, he thought, although the little girl had looked quite charming in a beautiful white lacy gown handed down from her great grandmother. But it was probably more related to the way Stuart’s brother had put his arm around his wife and gazed with such devotion at his family. It had engendered a surge of jealousy in Kole he’d never experienced before, and that had unnerved him more than anything. He didn’t want to feel jealous, or envious, or anything in fact for something he’d chosen not to have.

And now he felt all out of sorts, and not at all in the mood for a play-date. The kiss the night before had been lovely, but he couldn’t imagine Tasha agreeing to go to bed with him when it came to the crunch. Either she would back out or he would, depending on who won the game of chicken, but until that point they were both going to have to play along and pretend it felt perfectly normal for a couple who had been friends, and often enemies, for nigh on eleven years to suddenly strip off and get physical with each other.

He sighed, got out of the car, and walked up the path to the house. Hopefully Tasha wasn’t in a particularly confrontational or aggressive mood. He loved her bright mind and sharp wit, but he didn’t feel capable of a full-blown battle that evening, and unusually for him, he didn’t particularly feel in a sexy mood either. Half of him wished he’d rung to cancel.

He’d just reached the door when it opened before he’d had a chance to knock, so Tasha must have been waiting for him. She came out, closing it behind her, and stood before him, clutching her bag as she nibbled her bottom lip and waited.

“Hey,” she said.
Kole stared at her. He’d thought she looked softer the night before, in her slacks and T-shirt and high heels. But nothing could have prepared him for the way she looked tonight.

She wore a knee-length summer dress made from some kind of floaty material in a dark pink that fell in soft folds, emphasizing her generous breasts and the curve of her hips. A pair of strappy high-heeled sandals in the same color complimented the outfit perfectly. Her hair was down for once, tumbling around her shoulders in dark waves. For maybe the first time ever except when she went swimming, she wasn’t wearing her glasses, and she’d outlined her eyes in black and her lips bore a pinky gloss.

“Fucking hell,” he said.

Relief flashed across her face, there and gone like the rosella parrots that swooped through the garden past them in a blur of color, but he caught it. She’d been nervous about his reaction. The thought warmed him through.

A wry smile quickly replaced her look of relief, though. “I’m guessing I should take that as a compliment?” She glanced down at herself and then raised an eyebrow, looking more like the Tasha he was used to.

He gathered his wits. She’d done something he’d once heard her swear she would never do—dress to impress a man. Of course, she’d probably done so because of the bet. She wanted the shop, and this proved how desperate she was to get it.

But even so… The brief look of relief she probably hadn’t been aware of told him there was more to it than that. She’d wanted to please him. How utterly delightful.

“It is very much a compliment,” he said. “You look amazing.”

“Thank you.” She touched a hand to her hair in a womanly gesture that made him smile.

“You look nice too.”

“Thanks.” He wore a long-sleeved black shirt and a pair of cream chinos. “I think we make a dashing couple.” He held out his hand.

She slid hers into his, and walked with him down the path to the car. “Dashing? Next you’ll be saying we’re ‘walking out’ or ‘promenading’.”

“I would love to promenade with you. You deserve to be shown off, looking like you do.”

The corner of her mouth curved up in a Tasha-type smile, but as she glanced up at him, unable to hide the pleasure his comment had obviously given her, a tingle descended his spine. Without makeup she had a distinctive natural beauty; with makeup she looked stunning, exotic.
His fingers tightened on hers, and when they reached the car, he turned her to face him, moving close so their bodies touched. He slid his free hand into her hair to cup her head; the dark strands felt like silk ribbons sliding through his fingers.

“Are you going to smudge my lip gloss?” she murmured.

“Yes.” When she didn’t complain, he bent his head and touched his lips to hers. They were deliciously sticky, and when he moved back, their lips peeled apart.

He lifted his head and looked into her eyes, seeing the glint of lenses over her irises. Her pupils were dilated, and his body hardened in response, preparing itself for her. Sure, this might all be fake, a carefully constructed attempt to turn him on. But it was working, and to be honest he didn’t really care.

“You’ve cheered me up,” he said, sliding his hand reluctantly from her hair.

She smiled. “I’m looking forward to dinner.”

“Me too. Come on, I’m starving.”

She laughed and opened the car door, and he walked around to the driver’s side and got in. They buckled their seatbelts, and he started the engine.

“Why did you need cheering up?” she asked as he drove away.

“Oh, I saw Stuart today at his niece’s christening.”

“Stuart Casey?”

“Yeah.”

“How’s he doing?”

Kole shrugged. “As you’d expect.”

“Ria’s been gone about eighteen months now, hasn’t she?”

“Yeah.” He took the main road toward Cooper’s Beach.

“So no signs of him dating again then?”

“Nope.”

“I thought he might have met someone through the school, another teacher, or a single parent,” Tasha said. Stuart taught English at the school where Kole had taken the team photos.

“Not yet. Ria’s the only girlfriend he’s ever had, far as I know.”

Kole fell quiet as he thought about that, and Tasha looked out of the window and didn’t say anything either. He couldn’t imagine only having been with one woman. What must it feel like, to have one person who made you feel so complete you never wanted to date anyone else?
He glanced at Tasha, who was still looking out of the window. Was she thinking the same? Wanting to lighten the mood, he changed the conversation to talk about the restaurant, telling her he hadn’t been there before but he’d heard good reports about it, and even Fox had told him the chef there had real talent, which was an accolade in itself.

They chatted about food for a while and other restaurants they’d been to, then Tasha told him about a travel book she’d been reading. They started talking about places they wanted to visit, and in what seemed hardly any time they’d arrived at Cooper’s Beach. Kole parked the car and they got out, and he took her hand again and led her along the seafront to Antonio’s, a classy Italian restaurant overlooking the beautiful Doubtless Bay.

As the weather was warming up and the day had been dry and clear, he’d asked for a table on the large area of decking just above the sand. The sun hung low in the sky, spilling red and gold onto the waves, and citronella lanterns suspended from the roof filled the deck with puddles of orange light, as well as keeping away annoying insects.

The waiter showed them to a table right at the front, and they sat and took the menus. “Nice,” Tasha said, looking out across the sand where a few couples were walking along the shoreline, shoes in their hands and feet in the cool water. She glanced back at Kole, a twinkle in her eye. “Very romantic.”

“One does one’s best.” He smiled. And then something, he wasn’t sure what, made him add, “You look lovely tonight. Part of me wishes we were here for genuine reasons.”

Her mahogany eyes surveyed him. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t know.” He fiddled with the pepper pot, half-wishing he hadn’t said anything. But thinking of Stuart again, standing there quiet and sad, prompted him to carry on. “I want the shop. I’m not afraid of admitting that, and I still don’t have any intentions of giving it up. But—and it’s a big but—after seeing Stuart today, I feel uncomfortable about treating this…whatever it is we have, lightly. I took the bet partly because it amused me, but also because I do like you. We’ve always been attracted to each other, I think, although we’ve hidden it behind a kind of semi-filial irritation. But there is something there. And I genuinely want to explore it.”

He leaned forward. Without her glasses, her eyes entranced him. Her skin glowed in the candle light, and the unusually low neckline she wore revealed the sensual swell of her breasts. “I’ve always thought you were beautiful,” he continued, “but you look stunning tonight.” He let his gaze rest on her lips, which parted in response. He could remember the softness of them
beneath his own, the way his had peeled erotically from hers. He wanted to kiss her again. “And that has nothing to do with the bet. Whatever happens later, right here, right now, I want you.”
Chapter Eleven

Tasha stared at Kole. Well, her outfit had certainly had the desired effect. Desire sparked in his eyes, and his whole attention was fixed on her. He hadn’t even glanced at the blonde with the red mini skirt and D-cup boobs who’d walked into the restaurant. And his words made her melt like an ice cube left in the sun.

She glanced away, out across the sand to the glistening sea. Was it terrible his declaration flattered her? Previous boyfriends had found her attractive, but no man had ever said so the way Kole had just done. However, he’d said the words in reaction to her physical appearance, not her mind, and she felt ashamed she was reacting the way she’d scorned her mother for doing so many times.

And yet, she was tired of preaching from her pedestal. The desire she felt for him at that moment, the longing that threaded through her at the memory of his words, I want you… That had nothing to do with the bet. She wanted to take him to bed, wanted to feel his hands on her.

She looked back at him. He was still studying her, a strange little smile on his lips. He’d looked sad when he talked about Stuart, and the events of that morning had obviously affected him. It was nice to see him smile.

“I want you too.” There, the words were out.

His smile spread. They held each other’s gazes for a long moment, and she felt a thrill of excitement at the thought of what might happen when they left the restaurant.

Then he cleared his throat and looked down at the menu. “I might have a steak,” he said. “I have a feeling I need to keep my strength up.”

Tasha chuckled, although his words only increased the rapid pace of her pulse. “Me too,” she said. “I want to make sure I have plenty of energy.”

He laughed, shaking his head as he read through the dishes, and Tasha grinned and scanned through the menu. This was fun! Kind of like an appetizer in itself, with all the promise of the main course to come later that evening.

The waitress came up and they ordered their meals, and true to his promise the night before, Kole ordered a bottle of wine and kept her glass topped up, having just the one glass himself as he was driving.
Tasha let him, feeling in the need for some Dutch courage, although she made sure she alternated with water, not wanting to be comatose when they eventually went back to his place. But she did feel the need to relax a little. Every time she met his gaze, a frisson of excitement spread through her. He looked strikingly handsome in his black shirt, enough so that women glanced at him as they walked past, and the waitress fussed over him more than she fussed over Tasha. But to his credit, he seemed to have eyes for nobody but herself, listening intently when she spoke, laughing at her jokes, and seemingly enjoying her company. When their meal came, he fed her a piece of steak from his fork and she let him have a taste of her pasta, and to anyone watching, they must have appeared as if they’d been dating for months.

“So are you always like this with the girls you date?” She asked the question as she sipped her wine and took small bites of her dessert. The sun had sunk to a curve above the horizon, and the beach was mostly in shadow.

Kole leaned back in his chair, one arm over the back, and tipped his head. “Now why would you bring up other girls when we’re having a perfectly nice evening together?”

She played with the stem of her glass. “I don’t know. I feel…unnerved.” The wine had loosened her up, and honesty crept over her like the coming night. “You have your date hat on tonight, and you’re…different, just as I’d thought you would be, and I suppose I’m wondering if you’re this way with all the other women.”

“For a start, ‘all the other women’ makes me sound like a right tart.”

“Well, if the cap fits…”

He gave her a wry look. “I haven’t been with that many, no more than any other guy we know. And anyway, what do you mean, different? I’m not aware of acting any different than usual.”

She thought about it while she sucked tiramisu off her spoon. “Attentive. Focused, I suppose.” She took another spoon of the coffee-flavored cake and placed it in her mouth, conscious as she did so of his gaze on her lips. “And you’re looking at me the way I look at this dessert.”

His lips curved. “I must admit that the words ‘lick’ and ‘suck’ are jumping into my mind at the moment.”

She glanced around to make sure nobody had overheard them, then dipped the spoon into the cake again. “Are you trying to shock me? If so, it won’t work. I’m unshockable.”
He leaned forward on the table, his hazel eyes in the semi-darkness turning the color of the melted chocolate on her plate. “So you don’t mind then if I say something like…I can’t wait to get you home, strip you naked, bury my mouth in you, and see if you taste as sweet as that dessert?”

She stopped with the spoon in her mouth and stared at him. His challenging gaze searched hers. Clearly, he meant every word.

Her heart raced at the thought of him planting kisses slowly down her body before he pleasured her with his tongue. Only one of her previous lovers had offered to give her oral, and he hadn’t been great at it, often applying too much pressure and making her wince. It wouldn’t have surprised her if Kole had a degree in it.

Removing the spoon, she wiped delicately at the corners of her mouth and tried not to look flustered. “I don’t mind at all. As long as you don’t mind if I do this.” She took another spoon of cake, placed it in her mouth, and sucked the chocolate off it suggestively.

Kole watched her, his eyes widening. When she’d done, he blew out a breath in a long, slow exhalation.

Tasha couldn’t help but laugh, and he joined in.

“Touché,” he said.

She grinned. “Serves you right. Getting a girl all hot and bothered like that.”

He opened his mouth to reply, but at that moment the waitress returned with their coffees, so he waited until she’d placed their cups before them and retreated before he spoke again.

“Anyway,” he said, raising the cup to his lips. “You can hardly talk about being different on a date. I’ve never seen you dress like this…well, ever.”

She scratched her nose, then added a small spoon of sugar to her coffee. “Yeah. Fair enough. I wasn’t going to. It goes against the grain to dress for someone other than myself.”

“Are you sure that’s what you’re doing?” he said softly. “Something tells me you like how you look tonight.”

She stirred the cup, watching the foam mingle with the coffee in caramel-colored swirls. “I don’t know what to say to that. It feels odd, discussing this kind of thing with you.”

“So you’re happy to be intimate with me physically, just not emotionally?”

She raised her eyes to see him watching her, smiling. “Come on, you’ve known me long enough to understand what I’m like.”
“I have. And I know you resent your Mum for putting so much emphasis on the importance of a person’s physical appearance, which is why you’re usually so determined to make it low priority. But equally, I think a small part of you likes the effect you’ve had on me.” His eyes twinkled.

She stirred her coffee again. “Maybe.”

He reached out, and to her surprise, took her hand in his. “Why does that upset you?”

Surprised he’d read her mood, she shrugged. “I suppose it seems so shallow. I’m flattered you find me attractive—of course I am. You’re a good looking, sexy guy, and I’m not used to this kind of attention. I’d be lying if I said it didn’t make me feel good. But I won’t be dressing like this permanently. I want someone to love me for me, for what I’m like inside. Not how much cleavage I’m showing.”

She thought he would laugh at that and make some comment about her breasts being on display for once. Not that she’d actually caught him looking yet, but every time she glanced down she felt as if she was standing on the edge of the Grand Canyon, and she couldn’t imagine he’d missed the view from his high vantage point.

But he didn’t laugh. Instead, he frowned. “Tasha, are you under the impression I said I want to take you to bed because I’ve suddenly realized tonight you have a figure?”

She fidgeted. When he said it like that, it made her sound petty and childish. “Well, you did say you liked the way I looked tonight,” she said resentfully, “and it’s not as if you’ve made a move on me before.”

He stared at her. “Firstly, I also said I’ve always thought you were beautiful. And secondly…” He frowned again. “I’ve never made a move on you before because I didn’t think you were interested.”

“I wasn’t,” she said. But even as she said the words, she knew it wasn’t the truth. She’d always liked him. Always found him attractive. But he was Maisey’s brother, and she’d known him forever, and their relationship had always been kind of sisterly-brotherly, which meant it had never had the chance to develop into anything else.

She bit her lip and looked at her hand. He still held it in his own, his fingers tanned against her paler skin, which implied to her he wasn’t too insulted by what she’d said. “Actually, that’s a lie.”

“I wouldn’t have believed that, but it’s not the first time someone’s suggested it,” he said.
Her gaze flew back to his. “What do you mean?”

He shrugged. “Fox wasn’t surprised when I told him we were seeing each other. I saw him this morning.”

She raised her eyebrows. “What did you tell him?”

“I mentioned we were dating. I’ve always been so protective of Maisey, so worried one of my mates would take advantage of her and then I’d have to kill him.” He smiled. “So I suppose I thought I wanted to check he was okay with it.”

She couldn’t imagine what her brother had thought. “What did he say?”

Kole scratched his ear and looked out to sea for a moment. When his gaze came back to hers, she could see his exasperation. “He said ‘Break her heart, I’ll break your fucking legs.’”

Tasha burst out laughing. “That doesn’t sound like him.”

“He was quite adamant.”

“Kole, he was teasing you. Fox doesn’t give a fuck who I go out with. He knows I’d tell him it’s none of his business, and it isn’t.” She grinned. “Anyway, it’s not something you have to worry about. There’s no way I’m letting my heart come anywhere near you, Mr. Casanova.”

He rolled his eyes. “I know that and you know that, but Fox didn’t seem so convinced.”

She sipped her coffee. “Well if it’s any consolation, my mother wasn’t shocked either.”

“No?” His eyebrows rose.

Tasha lowered her gaze and rubbed her thumb over his knuckles. She didn’t want to relay all of Laura’s words. *Anyone with eyes can see the way he looks at you.* She shivered at the memory of them.

“Nobody’s surprised except us, it seems,” Kole said. “And the more I think about it, the more I realize us getting together was inevitable. Like two planets in the same solar system. Eventually, they’re going to come into conjunction.”

His dark eyes made her shiver. “You’re going to say something about black holes now, aren’t you?” she said, trying to make him laugh, to dispel the sexual tension she could feel rising between them.

But he leaned forward, raised her hand to his lips, and kissed her fingers. The touch of his lips on her skin brought hairs rising all over her body, and her nipples tightened beneath the silky dress.

Chapter Twelve

Kole drove them back to his place, a little faster than he probably should have along the winding roads due to his rising apprehension. Tasha chatted much like normal as he drove, however, surprisingly composed considering where the evening was heading.

A strange mixture of emotions threaded through him, and he was conscious of his heart picking up its speed too as they neared his house. It had been an odd evening. This whole situation had taken him by surprise. He’d known Tasha such a long time, from when she used to wear long white socks and have her hair in braids. He’d assumed that even when things turned physical between them, he’d still feel the same way about her—affectionate, indulgent, and slightly irritated. Even though he was well aware of the innate sexiness she tried to hide beneath her rebellious image, she’d always be the girl who had once pushed him in the pool fully clothed at a party for mocking her new glasses.

He hadn’t expected his feelings to change. Throughout the evening, their conversation hadn’t turned intimate as such; they talked like normal, about movies and music and rugby, and if they hadn’t made the bet on Friday, they would have been just two good friends having dinner together.

But something had changed, and he couldn’t put his finger on what. Was it Tasha, or something in himself? Certainly, she looked different tonight, sexy and sultry in a way he could never have prepared himself for. But that wasn’t it. Perhaps it was the knowledge they were going to take it further. Like a Christmas present under the tree, she held the promise of delight, and his fingers itched to unwrap her.

But that still didn’t explain the way his pulse had picked up its pace each time she’d looked at him across the dinner table. Her eyes had captivated him, a hundred different emotions moving beneath the surface like fish that swam away every time he reached out for them.

What was she thinking? Was the bet on her mind too, the concern that this relationship, such as it was, had been constructed on a paper foundation? He was worried it could come crashing around his ears if he hurt her. He didn’t want to lose her as a friend.

But she had insisted that men weren’t the only ones who could have sex without their hearts becoming involved. Perhaps he was being egotistical in assuming she would fall for him. She wasn’t the kind of girl who was always declaring herself in love. She’d always had a matter
of fact approach to relationships. So maybe he ought to drag himself into the twenty-first century and start understanding that not every woman dated with the sound of wedding bells in her ears.

He drew up outside his house, put on the handbrake, and turned off the engine. Tasha unclipped her seatbelt, but didn’t get out.

He unclipped his belt too, and turned in the seat to face her.

“Well,” she said. A strip of moonlight slanted through the car like a blade, and her eyes glittered.

He cleared his throat and glanced at the clock on the dashboard. It read nearly nine o’clock, hardly midnight, but too late to pretend he’d be inviting her in just for coffee. “It’s getting late,” he said.

“Are you normally in bed by nine?” She sounded amused.

“No, but even so…” He hesitated, unnerved by her eyes without her glasses. It reminded him she could see through all the barriers he’d erected around himself over the years, right to the young man he’d once been before Harry’s death, before everything had changed. That made him feel…uneasy.

“Are you having second thoughts?” she said softly.

“No,” he said, not sure if it was a lie. “I thought maybe you were.”

Even in the semi-darkness, he saw the shake of her head. “No. I’m…”

“Nervous?” Even as he said it, he realized he was voicing his own emotion. He was nervous about taking her to bed. Jeez. He hadn’t been nervous about having sex since he was sixteen.

Tasha tilted her head, and her eyes scanned him like one of those laser readers he’d seen on sci-fi movies. “A little, but in a nice way. Excited.”

A thrill of anticipation brought goose bumps rising all over his body as if a cool breeze had wafted through the car. But it wasn’t cold, not in the sub-tropical Northland in December. The humid air had brought beads of perspiration out on his skin, and if he looked in the mirror he knew he would see his hair curling around his temples. Tasha’s eyes were what had made him shiver, their intensity, and the look in them that held the promise of a warm and sultry night.

“It’s okay, if you’ve changed your mind,” she said. “I understand. I can’t say this doesn’t feel…unusual. It’s like being an actor, stepping out from behind the curtain on stage, and seeing the audience for the first time.”
“I haven’t changed my mind. But…” He might as well be honest. “I suppose I didn’t expect us to get to this point.”

“You thought I’d back out?”

“Yes. Until now it’s been fun teasing you and flirting. But I don’t want to lose your friendship if something goes wrong.”

She took his hand and linked their fingers, brushing his palm with her thumb. “What could go wrong?”

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You won’t hurt me.” Her thumb continued to circle his palm, and a shiver ran between his shoulder blades and down his back.

“Tasha…”

She took a deep breath. “Listen. I know we made this stupid bet, and I know it’s lying beneath the surface of what we’re doing like a landmine, threatening to explode if we aren’t careful. But the thing is, we’ve got confused. The landmine isn’t the bet. The landmine is the desire that’s been there all along, and it was only a matter of time until we triggered it. All the bet has done is open the padlock and release the chain we’d used to keep our feelings at bay. Yes, we both want the shop and we’ll have some fun arguing about that when the eight days are up. But this…” She stroked her thumb across the inside of his wrist. “This has nothing to do with the bet. This is happening because we’re attracted to each other.”

His body hardened in response to her intimate and sensual touch, and her words.

“Earlier,” she continued, “at dinner, you told me ‘I want you.’ If you’ve changed your mind, that’s fine. Just say so now and we’ll call it a day, no hard feelings. But if you haven’t…if you still want me…then let’s not overthink this. Because I want you, and I’m nervous and excited and turned on at the thought of getting you naked, and taking you to bed.”

He was hard as concrete now, and she’d hardly touched him. “I do want you,” he said. “I meant every word I said earlier. And as long as you’re sure, there’s absolutely no doubt in my mind.”

She smiled. “Why don’t we go inside then?”

He raised her hand and touched his lips to her fingers. “Come on.”
Outside, the warm night air stroked across his skin as they walked up the path to his front door. He opened it and stepped back to let her precede him, then followed her in and shut the door behind him.

She walked into the open plan living room, looking around her with interest. “It’s so warm tonight.”

“Open up the doors if you like. I’ll get us a drink.” He threw his keys on the kitchen counter, took two glasses, and chose one of the bottles of Scotch from the cupboard. She was the only woman apart from his sister who liked the kind of whisky he drank. After placing a few ice cubes in each, he poured a generous measure of the amber liquid over them, and added a splash of cold water from the bottle in the fridge.

Tasha had opened the large glass doors leading onto the deck and now stood outside, looking past the garden at the view of Mangonui. Christmas lights in the houses across the harbor looked like colorful dancing fireflies. The bright moon was reflected on the water, and it covered everything in a faint silver light.

Kole carried the glasses across the living room and onto the deck, and passed one to Tasha. She took it, and watched him take a mouthful of the whisky.

“So you’re not planning on driving me back tonight then?”

He swallowed the mouthful and then realized what she meant. Shit. That was quite an assumption. “Ah. I’m sorry. I didn’t think. I just assumed you’d stay the night.” He waited for her to give him a sarcastic reprimand for presupposing she would want to stay.

But instead, she moved closer to him and reached up to cup his cheek. “You can be very sweet sometimes.”

His lips curved. “Doesn’t sound like me.”

Her smile mirrored his. “No, it doesn’t.”

She dropped her hand and sipped the whisky, turning to look back into his house. “This is a nice place.”

“Yeah. I’m sorry I haven’t invited you all around yet. I realized the other day I’ve been in three months now.” Actually, keeping the place to himself hadn’t been a mistake. He’d always rented with someone else before, but this was the first house he’d bought, and he was enjoying being a home owner, having the house to himself, and doing the place up exactly as he wanted it.

“It’s very…minimalistic.”
“I don’t like a lot of fuss.”
“I can see that.” She winked at him. “Am I going to find forgotten lipsticks in the bathroom cabinet and a selection of ladies’ panties left around the place?”
He gave her a wry look. “I haven’t brought any girls back here, so I think you’ll be safe.”
She raised her eyebrows. “Oh? Why not? I thought having a bachelor pad would be the perfect place to seduce all your conquests.”
“All my conquests? Just how many women do you think I’ve been with?”
“I’m sure you’ve been with more girls than I’ve been with guys.”
Even though that was almost certainly the case, he wanted to argue the point, but her words distracted him. “How many guys have you been with, then?” he asked. He’d only met two of them, but presumably there’d been more than that.
“That’s not a very polite question to ask on a date.”
He knew her too well to let her get away with that. “Stop avoiding the question.”
She sipped her whisky, a mischievous look crossing her features, and leaned back on the balustrade. “I’ll tell you if you tell me first.”
“How many girls I’ve slept with?”
“Yes.”
He scratched the back of his neck. “Ah…”
“Kole Graham, are you seriously telling me you can’t remember? Is it more than fifty?”
“Jeez, no. I’m not that bad. But at uni there were a few…short-term relationships, shall we say.”
“One-night stands, you mean?”
He grinned.
“So how many, roughly?”
He shrugged. “Twenty or so, I suppose.”
“Twenty! I’m shocked.”
“Really?”
“Shocked it’s so low. I thought you’d be in triple figures. At least.”
He rolled his eyes. “So what about you, then? Can you beat that number?”
She gave him an odd look. “Not quite.”
“So? Come on, be honest. Fifteen?”
“Lower.”
“Thirteen.”
“Lower.”
“Ten?”
“Three,” she said.
He stared at her, genuinely surprised. “Three? Are you sure?”
“Yes, Kole, I’m sure.”
“I thought nobody was in single figures these days.”
She gave a small laugh. “It’s nice I can still surprise you.”
“You have surprised me.” That was an understatement. She’d gone out with her first boyfriend, Lewis, at sixteen, and they’d dated for a couple of years, from what he could remember. Kole had been away at university when she’d broken up with him, but Maisey had told him Lewis had cheated on her, and as soon as she’d found out, she’d dumped him. Then of course she’d gone to university, and he hadn’t seen much of her until she came back to Mangonui a couple of years ago. Since then, he’d only met one of her dates, which must have been the guy who’d told her she ought to work in a brothel, but he’d assumed there had been more and he just hadn’t met them. “You’re seriously telling me you only dated one guy while you were in uni?”
She looked out across the harbor. “Yes. I met him in my second year. Maisey introduced us. She was going out with Neil at the time and Jason was a mate of his. We all went around together for a while, but it was never serious.”
Her gaze came back to Kole’s. Something about her carefully guarded words told him she wasn’t telling the whole truth. She’d like this Jason, but he’d not returned her feelings. He’d hurt her.

Kole was beginning to realize his relationship with Tasha was like an archaeological site recently exposed to the air by the elements. He’d thought he knew her well, but their friendship had been very much on the surface, and neither of them had excavated deep enough to uncover the real person beneath. She projected a sassy, determined, belligerent persona, but just like his nonchalant, devil-may-care attitude, the crisp coating protected a soft chewy center that few people realized was there.
She’d only had three partners, one of whom had cheated on her, one who hadn’t returned her affection, and the last one had practically called her a whore. She deserved more, so much more.

The light breeze stirred the skirt of Tasha’s dress around her thighs, lifted her hair around her neck. Her eyes were filled with hunger, and as he met her gaze and let a small smile touch his lips, she inhaled and her lips parted. She looked young and beautiful, and desire stirred within him like a bear waking up after hibernation.

Enough talk.

Kole finished off his whisky and put the glass on the balustrade. He slipped a hand into her hair, the strands curling around his fingers. Then, moving closer to her, he bent his head and lowered his lips to hers.
Chapter Thirteen

Tasha held her breath and stayed motionless as Kole kissed her.

For a moment, she’d thought he was about to call the whole thing off. After leaving the restaurant, he’d grown quiet in the car, and when they’d pulled up outside his house he’d seemed reluctant to go in. At first, she’d thought he was chickening out, and their friendship had got in the way of their desire for one another. But she’d quickly realized that although their friendship was the problem, it wasn’t in the way she’d thought. I don’t want to hurt you, he’d said. He genuinely didn’t want to screw their friendship up. And that, along with the fact he’d obviously hoped she’d stay the night rather than want to go home after they’d had sex, had melted her a little inside.

She still held the glass in her left hand, but she pressed her right against his chest for balance and leaned into the kiss. His hand was warm on the back of her neck, holding her there with just enough force that a frisson of excitement ran down her spine. She’d told the truth when she’d said she’d only had three partners, but what she hadn’t mentioned was none of them had been a match for her in bed. Great sex was like the Grand Canyon—she knew it existed, and it was supposed to be magnificent, but she hadn’t yet seen it for herself. But Kole’s casual arrogance, his dry wit, and his innate sexiness told her he might be able to take her on a guided tour of the sights.

His lips moved across hers, firm and warm, and then his tongue brushed her bottom lip, and she opened her mouth to allow him in. He tasted sweet and hot, like tropical flowers opening in the summer sun, and his aftershave rose from his warm body to ensnare her senses. His hand tightened in her hair, bold, possessive, and she murmured approvingly.

He lifted his head, and his eyes looked black in the moonlight, filled with desire. But his touch was gentle as his other hand rested on her hip, his thumb just stroking her waist, and when his lips moved across her cheek, they were like feathers brushing across her skin.

He kissed back to her mouth and must have felt the curve of her lips, because he lifted his head again and smiled back. “What?”

“You.” She traced her fingers across his shirt. “You’re so gentle. I didn’t expect it.”

“You thought I’d heft you over my shoulder and carry you to the bedroom like a caveman?”
She chuckled. “Maybe.”

His lips touched her cheek, her eyebrow, her nose. “You sound almost disappointed.” His lips and then his tongue caressed her lips. “Do you like it rough, Tasha?”

She couldn’t stop her inhalation, which his mouth must have felt as it closed over hers.

“No,” she murmured when he moved back. “Yes. I don’t know. That’s not what I meant.” She was fumbling now. How inexperienced she was at this, no match for him at all.

“What did you mean?” His hand slid through her hair and he curled the strands around his fingers as he continued to place soft kisses on her lips.

“Um…”

He cupped her cheek, his skin warm on hers. “You want me to shock you?”

No.

Yes.

She didn’t know what she wanted.

His gaze searched hers. Then he dropped his hand.

He took the glass from her and placed it next to his on the balustrade. Looked out across the harbor for a moment. Then he turned back to her.

He slid a hand around her to her neck, and she felt him tug at the zipper of her dress, pulling it all the way down to her waist. Then he placed his hands on her thighs.

Slowly, he gathered the material of her dress up in his hands. He held her gaze while he did so, his eyes hot, amused, daring her to stop him. Her breathing quickened, but she said nothing, letting him lift the dress up over her thighs, up her hips.

“Lift your arms,” he murmured.

She hesitated. Was he going to strip her right there, on the deck? A fence ran around his garden, shielding them from his neighbors, but because the house was elevated they had a clear view across the harbor. Light from the living room lamp spilled onto the deck, which meant they’d be silhouetted, visible to anyone on the waterfront who looked up.

But they were far enough way that she doubted anyone would recognize her. And Kole might be mischievous, but he wouldn’t do anything to embarrass or shame her. He just wanted to shock her, as he’d said.

Locking her eyes on his, she lifted her arms.
His lips curved. He drew the dress up and over her head, then threw it into the living room where it whispered down onto the floor.

Tasha fought the urge to cover herself up. He opened his hands and she placed hers in them, and he held them out to either side, admiring her.

“Fuck, you’re gorgeous.”

She nibbled her bottom lip, his obvious admiration warming her right through. “If I get reported for indecent exposure, you’re paying the fine.”

He laughed and pulled her hands behind her back, holding them there so she was pressed against his chest, unable to move. “It’s a deal.” He released her hands, and then she felt his fingers on the clasp of her bra at the back. “Let’s really give them something to talk about.”

“Kole…”

He ignored her and popped the catch, rather expertly, she noticed, and the elastic loosened. Then he drew the straps down her arms and threw it inside on top of the dress.

Tasha gasped, certain there were outraged people all over Mangonui in the process of telephoning the police, and she opened her mouth to exclaim. But before she could say anything, he placed his hands under her butt and lifted her, wrapped her legs around his waist, turned, and went inside, closing the door behind him.

Feeling a wave of affection for him, she kissed him as he carried her through the living room. He returned the kiss hungrily, muttering a curse as he banged a knee on the table and bumped into the sofa, and giving her remonstrative glare when she laughed.

“Serves you right,” she scolded as he went down the hall. “Stripping me off in public like that.”

“You’d better get used to it. Now I know you want to be shocked, I’ll do my best to oblige.” She shivered at the thought, and he chuckled. “Does that turn you on, Tash?”

“You turn me on,” she said, breathless. She kissed him again, and he slowed, opening his mouth to her and meeting each thrust of her tongue with one of his own. She tightened her thighs around his waist, trying to ease the ache between them, and he groaned and tore his lips away from her.

“If I’m not inside you in five minutes, I’m going to severely embarrass myself.” He carried her into the bedroom and flicked on the bedside lamp, casting the room in a soft glow.
A thrill passed through her at the notion of him losing control because of her. She couldn’t believe they were actually there, in his bedroom, and he was about to make love to her. Her heart pounded, and her mouth had gone dry.

He walked up to the king size bed, turned and sat, then lay back, leaving her sitting astride him. “When we all went swimming, I always hated it when you wore a bikini.” He cupped her breasts with his warm hands. “If I let myself look at you, I’d have a hard-on in seconds. And that was before I knew what you looked like beneath.”

His words surprised her. She’d never caught him looking at her on the beach, and he’d never commented on her figure. The thought that he’d been aware of her on a purely visceral level came as a pleasant shock. “Do I meet with your approval?” she whispered.

He lowered his gaze to her breasts and stroked his thumbs across them. She followed his eyes, her lips parting as her relaxed, swollen nipples tightened to firm peaks beneath his touch.

His hands slid to her waist, and he held her and pushed up with his hips. “What do you think?” His firm erection pressed against her soft mound through his jeans.

She moved against him, arousing herself on him. “Mmm…”

He picked up her hands. “You’re determined to make this as difficult for me as possible, aren’t you?”

“Why?” she asked innocently, giving tiny thrusts of her hips. “What am I doing?”

“You know perfectly well.” He linked their fingers. “My turn to tease.” He pulled her hands above his head, bringing her nipples level with his face, and covered one with his mouth.

“Oh!” Tasha gasped as heat rushed through her. He sucked, his tongue stroking the sensitive skin, and she closed her eyes in bliss and arched her back. “Oh, God…”

He swapped to the other nipple, then back, until she was gasping and squirming, grinding herself again him. Much more of this, and she was going to come right there.

At that moment, though, he stopped, leaving her panting and a little shaky, and he lifted her off him onto the bed and pushed himself up.

“That was supposed to fire you up,” he said as he hurriedly unbuttoned his shirt, “but it almost backfired on me.” He dropped his shirt to the floor and slid down the zipper on his jeans. “You’re testing my self-control tonight.”
Tasha slipped off her panties and slid beneath the duvet. “I thought you prided yourself on your self-control.” She tried to sound sassy, but her heart hammered as he stripped off his jeans and boxers, finally exposing himself to her heated gaze. Wow.

“I do.” He sent her an amused look as he opened the bedside table, took out a condom, then got in beside her. “Shows you how much you’re turning me on.”

He pulled her into his arms and molded her body to his. Tasha ran her hand up his arm to his shoulder. She’d seen him shirtless before, of course, on the beach, in the swimming pool, but nothing compared to having him there, in her arms. His muscles were toned and firm, his chest nicely defined. His hot skin stuck to hers beneath the duvet, and he reached across her to flick on the switch for the ceiling fan.

“Hot stuff,” he said, and smiled.

He kissed her, and she sank a hand into his hair, opening her mouth to him. This was so different from how she’d pictured it. She’d thought he’d be fast and rough, hard and physical, and she was totally unprepared for the way he’d seduced her. And for the way she’d responded. In the past, she’d been proactive in bed, usually the one to decide on positions and happy to direct her partner for the best way to arouse her. But with Kole she felt a shyness she was completely unaccustomed to. His sexual experience had increased her nerves, and she couldn’t shake her worry about doing or saying the wrong thing. Looking foolish had never been an issue that had bothered her before. Was she trying to impress him? How stupid was that? She wanted to slap herself, to make a joke, to release this tension building inside her, but all she could think about was how gorgeous he was, and that she couldn’t believe they were finally doing this.

His hand skated over her back and hip, down her thigh. She was acutely conscious of his erection pressing against her stomach, the way his tanned skin was much darker than her own, of how he smelled, warm and masculine, of pure male. Her brain seemed to have turned to treacle; she couldn’t form a single coherent thought. She’d turned into pure sensation, touch, smell, taste. Every nerve ending tingled, and she ached to have him inside her.

He didn’t seem in any hurry, though, continuing to stroke her as he kissed her leisurely. But finally, he trailed his fingers up her thigh and pushed gently at her knee. Breathing quickly, she parted her legs for him, and for the second time in two days, and possibly only the second time since she’d known him, heat flooded her cheeks.
Kole lifted his head and surveyed her as he stroked lightly up her inner thigh. He obviously saw her blush—jeez, he couldn’t have missed it; her face was burning—but he said nothing, just smiled before his fingers sank into the heart of her.

Tasha closed her eyes. The way his fingers slipped easily into her, along with his quiet groan, told her she was swollen and wet, ready for him. She bit her bottom lip, holding back the long moan that threatened to escape from her, her cheeks still warm with the knowledge he was watching her as he stroked down.

He moved his fingers inside her, then brought them back up, coated with her moisture, to slowly circle and arouse her clit.

“Nice,” he said. He kissed her bottom lip where it was still caught between her teeth.

She opened her eyes, knowing she had to shake off this feeling of being sixteen again. But she couldn’t stop thinking, Oh my God, I’m having sex with Kole Graham. Her heart raced, and when he eventually reached for the packet and tore off the top, she knew she’d tensed up like a virgin.
Chapter Fourteen

Kole rolled on the condom, then moved between Tasha’s thighs. She was ready for him, there was no doubt about that; a few more strokes and he thought she might well have come for him. But as he pressed the tip of himself into her, he realized the blush that stained her cheeks was indicative of how much her apprehension was affecting her.

He settled himself on his elbows and kissed her, long and languorous.

When he finally lifted his head, she bit her bottom lip again.

“What’s the matter?” she whispered.

He kissed her nose. “Don’t be nervous.”

“I’m not…”

He kissed her lips. “You are. You’re tight, and I don’t want to hurt you.”

Her mouth opened, but words failed her, and she closed her eyes, obviously mortified.

He gave a small laugh and kissed her cheek, then around to her ear. “Don’t be embarrassed. It’s only me.”

“That’s the problem. I didn’t expect…” Her voice trailed off.

He kissed her jaw, then her lips again. “What?”

She shook her head. Her cheeks were still pink. Tasha, blushing again! He was both amused and touched.

What had she been about to say? He took a chance, deciding honesty was the best way forward. “I didn’t expect to feel like this either,” he admitted. “Maybe we both underestimated our feelings for each other.”

She gave a small nod. Her eyes were wide, and she blinked faster than normal. “I just…”

She moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue. “I don’t know why I’m nervous. I’m not normally like this. I didn’t expect you to be so…”

He waited. Then when no answer seemed forthcoming, he suggested mischievously, “Big?”

That made her laugh. “Perhaps that as well. But I was going to say, gorgeous.”

He had not expected that. “Oh.” What a nice thing to say.

They looked into each other’s eyes for a long moment. Something stirred inside him, warming him all the way through.
“Do you want me to stop?” he said gently. “I don’t mind—I’m not going to yell at you or anything. We can cuddle instead.”

Her lips curved. “No,” she said, looking more like the old Tasha. “I don’t want you to stop.”

*Thank God.* “Then we’ll take our time. We have all night. I’m in no hurry, honey.” He mentally crossed his fingers, hoping his self-control would hold out. She was incredibly wet and swollen, and he wanted to thrust his hips forward and bury himself in her, but he forced himself to hold back.

She touched his face, her thumb scraping across his bristles. “I take it back. You are a gentleman.”

He kissed her. “And you’re hot. Have I said that?”

She smiled shyly. “You mentioned something about it.”

He kissed her again. “When you’re relaxed, I’m going to make love to you nice and slow, and I want you to show me what you like.”

Her eyelids fluttered shut. “Okay.”

“I want you to show me how you touch yourself. So I know how to make you come.”

Her lips parted. “Oh.”

He kissed her eyelids, her cheeks, her mouth. “I want to watch you as the orgasm takes you, feel you tighten around me, hear you cry out with pleasure.”

She sighed. “Mmm.”

“And then later, you can tell me how to bring you pleasure with my mouth.”

Her thighs loosened a little beneath him. “Oh dear God.”

“You like the sound of that?” He dipped his tongue in her mouth, savoring the lingering taste of chocolate from her dessert, the hot spiciness of the whisky. So she liked him talking dirty? His pulse sped up at the thought.

“Yes,” she whispered.

“You’d like me to make you come with my tongue?” He grew even harder at the thought. *Stop torturing yourself, Kole.*

She gave a small, sexy moan, and her moisture coated the tip of his erection. “Yes.”

He smiled then. Underneath her nerves, Tasha was a sex goddess. He could have seen it a mile away. And now he knew how to get to her.
“And I will,” he promised. “Later. But first, I want to fuck you.”

Her eyes flew open, and her lips parted as she inhaled. “Kole!”

“What?” He moved his hips, pushing into her a little more. Luckily, she was so wet her tightness wasn’t going to be a huge problem. “Don’t act shocked. I know what your problem is. You’re a fucking hellcat in the bedroom, and nobody’s been able to cope with you before. Until now.” He smiled smugly. “Once you realize this is inevitable and we were always going to end up here, bet or no bet, we’ll set fire to this fucking bed.”

Her gaze met his, shocked and excited, and something sparked between them. Yes.

“Open up,” he teased, nibbling her bottom lip. “Let me in, Tasha. Let me show you what sex is really like.”

She blew out a breath, her muscles relaxing beneath his. And with one thrust of his hips, he slid right inside her.

She gave a long, slow moan that she tried to stifle. He tutted and kissed her. “Don’t. I want to hear you.”

“Oh God.” She clenched around him, and it was his turn to groan. “I can feel you,” she whispered. “All the way up. Jesus, you’re big.”

Knowing he was nothing special but flattered nevertheless, he withdrew until he was almost out of her, then pushed forward again. This time he went even deeper, and they both sighed.

He set up a rhythm, nice and slow, kissing her in between thrusts, enjoying the sensation of her so warm and tight and wet around him. And as she gradually relaxed and began to enjoy herself, she met each thrust with one of her own, her legs wrapped around him.

He could easily have come like that, but he wanted her to enjoy it even more than he desired his own climax. Not sure he was hitting the spot, he held her tightly, and still inside her, rolled onto his back, lifting her on top of him.

She sat up, looking surprised, but didn’t question him. And to his delight, she lowered her hand between her legs and stroked herself.

“Yes,” he said, pleased, and cupped her breasts. “Make yourself come for me.”

She began to move on top of him, and Kole thought at some point he’d died and gone to heaven. Now she’d obviously gotten over her nerves, she threw herself into their lovemaking with abandon. Her fingers circled faster, and she arched her back, pushing her breasts into his
hands. Her hair tumbled over her shoulders, and she caught her bottom lip between her teeth. He licked his fingers and transferred the wetness to her nipples, then squeezed them gently. She rewarded him with a moan, and then, not long after, her body stiffened and she clenched around him.

Kole watched her climax, loving her fierce frown, the pulse of her muscles, the way her fingers clawed involuntarily at his shoulder, her nails scraping his skin. *That’s going to leave a mark,* he thought with delight. *Nice.*

She leaned on him, panting, and eventually her eyes opened, her pupils huge and the mahogany irises just a tiny ring around the outside. “Wow,” she said.

Kole chuckled, caught her around the waist, and flipped her onto her back. “I knew you’d be a tiger in bed.”

“Me?”

He knelt up, still inside her, caught her hands in his, and linked their fingers. Then he looked at the scratches on his shoulder. She followed his eyes, and had the grace to look embarrassed.

“Eek. Sorry.”

“Don’t be.” He raised her hands and pinned them above her head. “I like it. That’s the Tasha I knew was in there. Let her out, baby. I want to fuck that girl.”

She wriggled, realized she couldn’t get free, and glared at him. “You’re the animal.”

“Damn straight.” He thrust hard, and she gasped. “What?” he said innocently, aware she must still be hypersensitive down there, and he was probably arousing her as he moved. “Lie still. It’s my turn. I’m going to fuck you now.”

Her mouth fell open in outrage. “Let go!”

He ignored her and thrust again, too keyed up to go slowly. “Jeez,” he said with a groan, “you’re so wet.”

“Kole!” She tugged at his hands, and he was fairly sure she’d have slapped him if she’d managed to pull free. “Let me go.”

But he’d held back long enough, and there was no way he was going to release her. She’d teased him for what seemed like hours, and he’d behaved impeccably, but now he wanted her at his mercy. Her body gripped him like warm, plush velvet that he sank into like a soft cushion. He
wanted to give in to his urge to thrust, again and again, until he lost it and spilled into her. So he did, grinding against her as he did so, and felt a surge of smug satisfaction as her eyes widened.

“Oh…” she whispered.

“Yes,” he said determinedly.

She tugged her hands again. “Kole…”

He kissed her, his tongue mimicking his thrusts inside her, heat building. “Come again for me.”

“I…can’t…” But her rapid breathing and accompanying moan suggested otherwise.

“You can, and you will.” He thrust harder, faster, her slick walls tight around him in spite of her moisture. *Damn, she feels good.*

She stopped fighting him, obviously realizing it was pointless. Her muscles relaxed and her thighs loosened, and he gave a grunt of satisfaction at her submission. He was close himself, and his hands tightened on hers as he struggled to rein in his passion. “If I’d known you were this good, I’d have fucked you years ago.”

She shook her head from side to side. “Don’t…”

He kissed down her neck to her breasts and sucked hard on a nipple. She cursed out loud, but the accompanying flood of moisture around him told him he’d done the right thing.

He couldn’t hold back much longer, but luckily he didn’t have to, because he could see she was close behind him. He let go and pumped hard until heat rushed up from his balls and he pulsed, the climax so powerful he felt as if every muscle in his body had been over-tightened to breaking point.

He buried himself deep inside her, pushing hard, and she squealed and came too, clenching around him and prolonging his orgasm until he thought he might black out.

He waited for the universe to reassert itself, then let out a long breath. “Fuck.”

“Fuck indeed.” Tasha was looking at him with a mixture of exasperation and amusement.

He met her gaze, and they both started laughing.

“Jesus. Ouch, don’t laugh.” He withdrew with a wince and fell back onto the bed, disposed of the condom, and gathered her to him with one arm.

She curled up beside him, chuckling. “You deserved that.”
“I probably did.” He kissed her forehead and then lay back to let his breathing calm, already half-regretting his actions. Nice, Kole. Remember how nervous she was? You’ve probably scarred her for life. “I’m sorry. I got carried away.”

“You did, rather.”

“I’m really sorry. I don’t know what happened.” Well, he did—she’d driven him to the point where he’d lost the plot, but he felt the urge to apologize.

She propped her head on a hand. “Are you under the impression I’m mad at you?”

“I thought you might be.”

She was so independent and feisty normally, and they locked horns almost on a daily basis, so he’d enjoyed finally wrestling her into submission. But she might resent him now, for proving that when it came to it, he could control her.

She didn’t look resentful, though. “Hey, I’d object to you bossing me around in real life, but in the bedroom it’s different. You were very…” She thought about it. “Grr.”

“Grr?” He looked at the red marks on his shoulder. “You were the one who was grr.”

She scratched her nose. “Even so. I’ve never slept with anyone so…” Her eyes met his, and her lips twisted. “Forceful. That’s the best sex I’ve ever had.”

“Well, that’s a very polite thing to say. Thank you.”

“I’m serious. I’ve never had multiple orgasms before.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Seriously?”

“Seriously. I didn’t think I was capable.”

“It appears you are.”

“It does.” She grinned. Then she nibbled her bottom lip. “Why did you switch positions?”

He turned onto his side, amused she wanted to discuss what had happened. “I didn’t think I was hitting the spot. You on top gives better access. And a better view.” He smiled.

She shook her head. “I still can’t believe I came twice. Did you know that was going to happen?”

He laughed. “I didn’t know. I hoped. Besides, sexual courtesy deems it appropriate to have at least one simultaneous orgasm.”

“Is that so?”

“From what I’ve heard.” He tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “I’m not sure why; I’m not a huge fan. If you accept the ratio of pleasuring your partner versus receiving pleasure
yourself is sixty-forty, simultaneous orgasms somehow detract from that. It’s much more fun to watch the other person come.”

She stared at him. “You mean forty-sixty, surely.”

“No. Well, maybe fifty-five, forty-five when I get carried away.”

“Seriously? Men place more importance on their partner’s pleasure than their own?”

“I can’t speak for half of the human race, but from my point of view, yeah.” He loved the way her hair curled around his fingers, as if he’d plunged his hand into a box of slippery ribbons. She didn’t reply, and when he looked back at her, she was studying him, a thoughtful expression on her face. He frowned. “What?”

She shook her head and changed the subject. “I know what you mean about simultaneous orgasms. I suppose one reason they’re considered to be something to aspire to is that it takes skill to control pleasure. Some women have trouble achieving orgasm at all.”

He snorted. “That just means the guy doesn’t know his stuff.”

“Maybe. And they don’t understand their own bodies, because as women we’re made to feel that pleasuring ourselves is something to be ashamed of. It takes practice and skill from both partners to be able to control your own and each other’s arousal, to slow down, speed up, and get there at the same time. That’s what makes it sexy, although I take your point about enjoying your partner’s pleasure. But I would imagine it’s fairly unusual for a couple to come together the first time they have sex.”

Another compliment. She certainly knew what to say to make a guy feel good.

“Do you pleasure yourself?” He traced a finger over her shoulder. He already knew the answer—she’d touched herself expertly enough to convince him she’d done it before. But he liked being provocative, teasing her. He’d enjoyed making her blush. He wanted to see it again. This time she was prepared though. “Of course I do. I’ll show you later, if you like.”

He stared at her. He hadn’t expected that.

She chuckled. “Your face is a picture.”

“You shocked me.”

“I can’t believe that.”

“Surprised me, then. But yes, I would like that.”

She stretched and yawned. “It’s a date.”

So she wanted to sleep with him again. That gave him an unexpected surge of delight.
He reached up a hand and cupped her cheek, then leaned forward and gave her a long kiss.
“I’m glad you got over your nerves.”

“Me too.” A shadow of her previous shyness passed over her face. “Thank you for being patient with me.”

“My pleasure, honey. As you could tell.”
She kissed his shoulder. “I need to take out my lenses before I doze off.” She hopped out of bed, retrieved her bag from the living room, and walked through to his en suite. “I won’t be long.”

“Sure.”
Within a minute or two she was back, and she slid under the covers and moved close to him.

He wrapped his arms around her. “That was nice.”

“It was.”

“I didn’t hurt you?”
She gave a little shake of her head. “No.”

“I am sorry if I was rough. But it’s your fault. You shouldn’t have been so sexy.”
She laughed and lifted her face to his. “You’re very sweet.”
He kissed her, and when he finally pulled away, her eyelids were drooping. “Get some sleep,” he instructed. His ran his hands lightly down her back, over her hip, then back up again.

“As much as you can, anyway. I’ll be waking you in the night.”

She looked up at him. “You promise?”

“Absolutely. I’m going to make the most of having you in my bed while you’re here.”
She licked her lips, then rested her head on the pillow. “Goodnight, Kole.”

“’Night, Tasha.”
She fell asleep quickly, her breathing soon turning regular, her body relaxing.
But Kole would lay awake for a while, thinking about the way she’d given herself to him, and how he’d felt when she came in his arms.
Chapter Fifteen

When Tasha awoke, darkness still shrouded the room. The open curtains revealed only a black sky, and no sign of early sunlight. What was the time? Three, four a.m.? There was no point in trying to look for a clock; she wouldn’t be able to read it without her glasses on. She normally slept like a log all night, and rarely roused. What had awoken her?

She lay on her front, arms around the pillow, Kole’s warm body pressed close to hers. The answer to her final question came with a brush of fingers up her back.

She gave no sign she was awake as he stroked her. Long, gentle traces of his fingers down her spine, then back up her ribs, up over her shoulders, and down again, over and over. How long had he been doing that?

He shifted in the bed, and then she felt the touch of his lips on her shoulder. He pressed soft, light kisses, peeling back the duvet slowly as he gradually moved down her spine. Down, and farther down, both lips and fingers skating across her skin, light and sensual.

Arriving at her hips, he pulled back the rest of the duvet, leaving her lying there naked, the cool air from the ceiling fan wafting over her. His lips touched the hollow at the small of her back, and she inhaled as she felt the warm wetness of his tongue there.

He kissed over the swell of her bottom, then shifted again so he could continue down her thighs to the backs of her knees.

Tasha lay there, almost holding her breath. How many times could this man surprise her? Even though she’d hoped he’d be able to show her a thing or two, normally he was so outspokenly lusty and matter-of-fact when it came to sex, she’d expected him to be a typical guy and take his pleasure from her without giving much thought to what she got out of it.

She hadn’t expected this…seduction. This exploration of her body. His insistence that his partner’s pleasure was more important to him. His all-consuming, overwhelming desire.

He reached her foot, and his tongue trailed over her ankle bone. Her internal muscles twinged. She kept quiet though. If she let on she was awake, he might stop.

He swapped to the other leg and began to kiss back up, and Tasha’s heart rate rose. She could hardly see anything in the room, the darkness heightening her other senses. She was becoming just a bundle of nerve endings. Everything tingled, tightened, ached.
He kissed up to the top of her thigh, and then ran his tongue ever so slowly up the crease of her bottom cheeks. She closed her eyes tightly. At the top, he gave a small nibble of her flesh, and she had to bite her lip to stop herself moaning.

His lips continued up her spine to her shoulders, and he lifted himself up and leaned over her. Her heart thundered.

He bent and kissed her neck, then beneath her ear. Then he whispered, “Turn over.” Tasha’s eyes flew open. He knew she was awake? She froze for a moment, embarrassed to admit she’d heard him. What would he do if she didn’t reply? Go back to sleep?

He took her earlobe in his mouth and bit hard enough to make her gasp. When he spoke again, his voice was firm, with a hint of a smile. “Do as you’re told.”

_Do as you’re told?_ She wanted to tell him to get lost—she wasn’t his plaything, there for his own private amusement. He couldn’t order her around. She was a modern woman, for God’s sake! She didn’t take orders from men.

But she didn’t. Instead, she rolled onto her back and shifted to lie beneath him. He towered over her, an even darker shadow against the blackness, blocking out the faint glimmer of starlight cast by the Milky Way behind him.

“Good girl.” Now his voice definitely held amusement.

Any protest she might have given was smothered by his kiss, which blew all thoughts away like gunpowder. Because in spite of the way he’d aroused her slowly, it wasn’t a gentle, why-don’t-you-wake-up-and-we’ll-see-what-happens kind of kiss. It packed enough heat to melt lead, and as his tongue played with hers and he murmured his appreciation, she felt the press of his erection against her hip, long and hard, more than ready for her.

But he lifted his lips and continued his leisurely arousal of her, kissing down her neck to her breasts, where he spent a while licking and teasing her nipples to hard points that he nibbled with his teeth. When she squirmed, he lifted his head and scolded, “Lie still,” before moving between her legs and continuing to kiss to her stomach.

She looked up into the darkness, sucking on her bottom lip and trying not to wriggle as his mouth moved oh-so-unhurriedly down. He dipped his tongue into her navel, kissed across her stomach. Then he shifted once more, lowering himself onto the bed between her thighs.

Tasha held her breath, tensing as she waited for the first brush of his tongue. It didn’t come immediately, though. Instead his warm breath caressed her, and then he blew gently down and
back up again, sending tingles all the way through her. She fought not to let out a protracted
groan.

He continued to take his time, moving up her legs, then pushing her knees apart, but her
legs felt taut and fought his pressure to fall open, even though she was desperate for him to kiss
her. He stroked her thighs, and she knew he was asking her to relax, but she just couldn’t. She
felt like an overwound watch, tight and tense with anticipation, too nervous and excited and
awkward to relax enough to open completely to him.

So he kissed her thighs, stroked her skin, and only when she grew used to his fingers and
some of the tenseness faded did he finally touch the part of her that by now was aching for
release.

His fingers stroked down, then parted her lips before sliding inside her. He brought up
some of her moisture and caressed her for a while, his fingers moving easily through her to circle
her clit. And only then did he finally lower his mouth.

Tasha couldn’t stop a low “aaah” of pleasure escaping her lips as he brushed his warm
tongue through her core. He stroked up her thigh as if responding with pleasure to her exhalation,
and when she dropped her hand to rest on her hip, his fingers tightened on hers briefly before
returning to between her legs.

He began slowly, with long, gentle strokes of his tongue, then trying short flicks with the
tip, and she realized he was trying to find out what she liked, what made her sigh, and what
caused her to groan and arch her back. So she whispered her approval when he sucked, tightened
her hands in his hair when he gave the long, slow licks, and when he slid two fingers inside her,
she moaned and gave small thrusts of her hips.

He was so gentle, so tender, giving the occasional sexy murmur when she responded to his
touch, his hand warm on her thigh. And gradually, as pressure began to build inside her, she let
go of her final reserve, believing in him, trusting him, giving herself over to him. She opened her
thighs wide and abandoned herself to the sensations spreading through her. It was like no orgasm
she’d had before, slow and unhurried, as if her muscles were being pulled together with a
drawstring to a tight center of pleasure deep inside her that then pulsed in long, rhythmical
contractions of pure bliss.
She exclaimed with each pulse, only half-conscious of tightening one hand in his hair while gripping the bedclothes with the other, but she did hear his deep, satisfied groan of contentment.

The pulses were only just dying away, like the last toll of a bell still echoing far off in the distance, when he lifted himself up and leaned over her. His erection rested against her stomach, hot and hard, and when he covered her mouth with his, she tasted her own arousal on his lips, musky and sweet.

He lifted his head, and she stuck her tongue out. Not sure whether he could see it in the darkness, she added, “Yuck.”

He chuckled and he leaned across to the bedside table before coming back to her, outlined in silver by the stars behind him. She heard the sound of a packet being torn open.

“I was going to go to sleep,” she said, her heart picking up its pace again. “Trust a guy to be so selfish.”

In answer, he took her hand and closed it around his erection, placed his hand on top of hers, and gave it several long, smooth strokes. Her jaw fell open at the feel of the soft skin sliding over his thick, hard length, and her mouth watered. He moved his hand away, but she left hers there, continuing to stroke him. “Are you sure you don’t want me to return the favor?” she asked, her voice sounding husky even to her. “I’d like to taste you.”

“No,” he said. “I want to fuck you.”

Tasha inhaled sharply, her hand pausing, and he removed it by the wrist so he could roll on the condom. She’d thought herself unshockable, but his unashamed announcement left her speechless, and she had to swallow to remove the dryness from her mouth.

Still astride her, he leaned forward and bent to brush his lips against hers.

“At some point, I’ll be happy to fuck your mouth,” he stated, “but for now, I want to fuck you from behind. If that’s okay with you.” His tone suggested it was a rhetorical question and she didn’t have much of a choice.

She looked up at him, overwhelmed by the sheer masculinity he exuded—his muscular arms braced either side of her, his demanding tone, his forcefulness and power.

In a normal situation, she’d have lifted her chin and defied him.

But this wasn’t a normal situation.
Heart thundering, she turned onto her front, and he shifted behind her, widening her legs to kneel between them. He pushed one of her knees up, and without further ado, slid his hand down the cheeks of her bottom, his fingers probing to find the opening beneath and slipping inside.

She gasped and bit the pillow, and he gave a deep, throaty laugh and extracted his fingers, only to replace them with the tip of his erection. Tasha braced herself for his thrust, but when it came, it was gentle, bringing with it a gradual sense of being expanded and filled as pushed his way into her.

He paused and rested his forehead on her shoulder, letting her adjust. Touched, she raised a hand and sunk it into his hair, turning to kiss his temple.

Kole dipped his head and kissed her on the mouth, hot and hard, and then began to move, long slow strokes that went deeper and deeper each time. She opened her thighs wide to give him a better angle, enjoying the position.

He slid his hand beneath her to tug at her nipples, then moved it down to between her legs to begin arousing her.

“You think you could come again for me?” he murmured as she moaned and rested her forehead on the pillow.

Oh yes. But she wasn’t going to let him have it all his own way. Two could play at the I-like-to-shock-you game.

“Maybe,” she whispered. “If you fuck me hard enough.”

He stopped, and she could picture the way his eyes had shot wide open in the dark, his eyebrows rising.

“And together,” she said. “If you can manage it.”

“You’re making demands now?” He nipped her ear.

She looked over her shoulder, meeting his lips. “Afraid of the challenge?”

“Never.” He kissed her. “How hard. Like this?” He thrust firmly.

“Oh.” She bit her lip, her body singing with pleasure. “Harder.”

He did it again, firmer this time. “Like this?”

“Oh, fuck. Yeah. Harder.”

He muttered a curse and thrust again, his hips meeting hers with a sharp smack, and she cried out with delight.
“Jeez, Tasha.” He continued at the same pace, grunting with each push. “You’re not doing my blood pressure any good.”

“Oh God.” The top of her head touched the headboard, and she held onto the slats tightly. “Don’t stop.”

“Couldn’t. If I. Wanted. To.”

She would have laughed if she wasn’t so turned on. “Oh…Kole…”

“Tell me…you’re close.”

“Not far.” She was going to end up with a bruise on her head, but at that moment she couldn’t have cared less. “Please…Keep going.”

His hand gripped the wooden slat above hers, the muscles of his arm hard as iron when she rested her cheek against them. “Fuck…”

She could feel his traitorous body tightening. “Hey, wait…” She bit his wrist as a warning. Unfortunately, however, that pushed him over the edge. His hips jerked, and he gave a long groan as his climax swept over him.

Tasha gripped his hair tightly, loving his harsh breathing, adoring the way he couldn’t hold back. He thrust and he thrust, and it was enough to tip her over too. Her orgasm took her swiftly, and she was only partly conscious of his loud complaints as she clamped around him, her muscles squeezing and milking him dry.

When she’d done, she looked over her shoulder. The sky had lightened enough for her to see the exasperated look on his face.

“You came before me,” she accused him. “I get to punish you for that.”

He gave a small laugh. “I look forward to it.” Then he bent and kissed her. His mouth was soft and gentle, full of tenderness, and a wave of affection washed over her.

He withdrew, disposed of the condom, and collapsed onto the bed beside her, and she curled up next to him.

“Can I sleep now?” She pretended to complain, although their lovemaking had filled her with a warm glow that had nothing to do with the early summer warmth.

“Be my guest.” He yawned. “I can’t make any promises for the morning, though.”

He fell asleep almost immediately. Tasha watched his chest rise and fall, and saw the first rays of the sun turn the hairs on his chest golden. And her mind was filled with his last gentle, tender kiss.
Chapter Sixteen

Tasha rolled into work fifteen minutes late.

Their boss tapped his watch as Tasha scurried in, and she mouthed “Sorry!” and sent him an apologetic look as she retrieved an apron and tied it around her waist.

She joined Maisey behind the counter that displayed rows of sandwiches, baked pastries, salads, and pies. Maisey was in the middle of serving and just grinned at her, and it was about ten minutes before the queue died down and they were finally able to talk.

“I guess I don’t need to ask where you’ve been,” Maisey said, stacking the shelves with more freshly-baked apple-and-cream-filled doughnuts.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

They exchanged a glance, and both started laughing.

“Have a good time?” Maisey asked. She closed the glass case, put the empty tray on the counter, and turned to survey her best friend.

“It was all right.” Tasha swept a pile of crumbs into the rubbish bin and stopped to wipe her hands on a cloth. She faced Maisey and adjusted her glasses, feeling suddenly awkward. “I feel a bit odd talking to you about it.”

“Yeah, me too.” Maisey’s characteristic sunny smile seemed a little dimmer than normal.

Tasha scratched at a piece of chocolate that had stuck to the counter. She hadn’t given any thought to how Maisey would feel about her fling with Kole. Maisey’s personality usually matched her clothing—bright, haphazard, and youthful. Beneath her apron she wore a black miniskirt and a pink T-shirt, and she’d piled her hair on top of her head and secured it with a glittery band. Her makeup was, as always, immaculate, her nails perfectly manicured and the same shade of pink as her top. She even walked with a bounce in her step, and Tasha adored her infectious laugh.

But there was a darker side to Tasha’s best friend very few people knew about. After Harry died when she was nineteen, Maisey had sunk into a deep depression she’d struggled with all through uni. On the surface, to those who didn’t know her well, she always appeared happy and bubbly, but she’d had to drag herself out of bed every morning, and some days she hadn’t even been able to manage that. Eventually, she’d found a suitable medication that helped her to deal with it, and since then she’d coped better. But several times a year she still suffered from the
occasional bouts where she would take a few days off work and disappear into her room to
wrestle the old black dog into submission.

The last thing Tasha wanted to do was upset her, and she wished she’d spoken to Maisey
about Kole beforehand. But there hadn’t really been time—the whole episode on the beach had
sprung up out of nowhere. Still, that didn’t mean she shouldn’t talk about it now.

More customers came through the door, though, making it impossible to chat. “Let’s catch
up at lunch,” Tasha suggested.

“Sure.” Maisey turned to serve the next in line.

Mondays were always busy, and the girls worked flat out until one o’clock, when they
were finally able to take a break. They bought a couple of rolls and made themselves a takeaway
coffee, then walked to a nearby small park where mothers pushed children on swings, and dogs
chased each other across the grass. The Northland sun beamed down, and neither of them had
brought jackets.

Tasha took a bite from her steak roll, the taste reminding her of Kole’s meal at the
restaurant.

“You’re thinking of him now, aren’t you?”

Tasha stared at her friend. “What do you mean?”

Maisey smiled. “You seem…different. Like he’s rubbed off your sharp edges.”

Tasha snorted. “He’s not that good.” But Maisey’s words puzzled her. She couldn’t have
changed already, after one night? What did Maisey mean?

She took a long swig of her coffee and watched a toddler trying desperately to climb onto
one of the bouncy horses, then bawl when he failed to pull himself up. His mum came and lifted
him on, and the tears miraculously disappeared as he swung himself happily to and fro.

“Maisey, I just want to say I’m sorry.”

Her friend’s eyebrows rose. “For what?”

“For not discussing it with you first.”

Maisey’s lips twisted. “You don’t have to ask my permission.”

“I know. But…” Tasha scratched her nose. “I feel bad. I didn’t think about you when we
made that bet on the beach. And that wasn’t fair. You know you come first for me, right? Our
friendship is very important to me.”

Maisey blinked hard. “Are you trying to make me cry?”
“Aw, no, honey.” The two girls hugged.

“Look,” Maisey said when they eventually drew apart. “Firstly, if I didn’t want the two of you to get together, I would have said so at the time. And in many ways, it wasn’t a surprise anyway.”

Tasha stared at her. “Not you as well?”

Maisey grinned. “Someone else say the same thing?”

“Fox, apparently. And my mother. Kole and I were the last to see it.”

Maisey waved a hand and took a bite of her roll. “It’s not that obvious. You’ve always argued. But beneath it there’s always been an undercurrent, you know?”

“A bit like you and Joss?”

It was Maisey’s turn to stare. “What? There’s nothing between me and Joss.”

Tasha held her gaze, and Maisey’s cheeks turned scarlet. “Seriously!” Maisey protested. “I’m absolutely the last person he’d be interested in. And I’m not interested either.”

“Ha!” Tasha scoffed. “Of course you are. He’s gorgeous.”

“He is gorgeous, but he’s also never shown any interest in me whatsoever. He’s like a brother, Tash, always has been, always will be. He’s only just stopped pulling my pigtails, for God’s sake.”

Privately, Tasha wondered whether Maisey gave any thought to the fact that Joss had stopped pulling her pigtails. He didn’t see her as a kid anymore—the dude totally checked her out whenever he thought she wasn’t looking.

But Maisey was already moving on. “Anyway, this is about you, not me, so stop changing the subject. Look, let’s just forget for now Kole’s my brother. What I want to know is…how did it go? Really?”

Their eyes met, and Tasha couldn’t stop a smile creeping across her face. “It was fantastic,” she admitted. “Best sex I’ve ever had.”

“Seriously?” Maisey’s eyes widened.

Tasha nodded. “It made me realize how hopeless the other guys I’ve been with were, even Lewis, who I thought was the bees’ knees at the time. But we were so young—he was my first and I think there’d only been one other girl before me for him, so it’s not that surprising we didn’t have a clue what we were doing. But Kole…” She tailed off at the memory of his
No. I want to fuck you. She shivered.

“Your eyes have glazed over,” Maisey said. “Was he really that good?”

“He was just so...intense.” She should have guessed. He’d warned her she’d get a hundred percent of him. You think you can handle that? Now, she wasn’t sure. He’d awoken her again shortly after seven and proceeded to make love to her a third time, kissing away her protestation that she had to go home to shower and change for work, and screwing her so thoroughly she felt slightly radioactive down below. Three times. In one night. And she’d thought she was demanding.

“So the outfit worked, then?” Maisey said mischievously. She’d helped Tasha get ready for the evening, had done her hair and talked her into wearing the lenses that had sat in the cupboard since Laura Wilde had dragged her daughter to the optician and forced her to buy them.

“You could say that.” Tasha thought of how he’d whipped the dress over her head in full view of the harbor, and sighed.

“Well, I hope you’re having an effect on him too,” Maisey commented. “Joss was convinced you were going to win this bet, but listening to you now I’m not so sure. I’m one of the judges, remember?”

Tasha waved a hand and stuffed the final bite of roll into her mouth. “No need to worry about that. It’s purely physical. I’m having a great time, but there’s absolutely no way I’m going to fall for Mr. I-refuse-to-commit. I know what he’s like. I’ve watched him date enough girls over the years. At the first sign of anything serious he runs a mile.”

“True.” Maisey smiled. “Fair enough. Well, I’m glad you’re having a good time. When are you seeing him again?”

“Not until Wednesday, actually. Tonight he’s going to Whangarei to take photos of a twenty-first birthday party. Fancy having it on a Monday! And Tuesday obviously we’re going out.” They had tickets for a famous Kiwi band performing over at the Hokianga, and they’d planned it ages ago.

“You don’t have to come,” Maisey said. “Caitlin was telling me she wished she had tickets.”

Tasha pushed away the brief surge of longing that flooded her. “No, no, of course I’ll go.” She didn’t want Maisey to feel she was taking second place to her brother, not for a minute.
“Okay. Well, I suppose we ought to get back to work.”

“Roll on working for ourselves, eh?”

“Absolutely.” They put their rubbish in the bin and walked slowly back to the café. “By the way, I had an idea for a new truffle,” Maisey said, and proceeded to talk about her notion for using local lemons for a mousse-filled chocolate.

Tasha listened and nodded, making a mental note to add the recipe to the list. Maisey would forget about it in an hour, but her ideas were always fabulous—she just needed Tasha to bring them to fruition.

She hadn’t thought much about the shop over the last couple of days. She had to remember the site on the waterfront was the real reason behind her attempts to seduce Kole. If she concentrated on that, it should keep things nice and simple.

The rest of the day passed quickly, and that evening Elle and Caitlin came around, and they spent a pleasant few hours talking about Treats to Tempt You and drawing up plans for how they wanted the shop to look inside.

“Any news on the site?” Elle asked. Surprisingly determined beneath her soft-spoken, gentle persona, Elle had been the first person to spot the waterfront shop in the estate agent’s window.

“I’m working on it,” Tasha said, causing Maisey to cough into her drink.

“What’s the joke?” Caitlin was the younger sister, the one who’d inherited all the attitude, all the sass.

Tasha met Maisey’s laughing eyes and gave a little shake of her head. They were all good friends, and they’d all lived together for a few months toward the end of their uni days, but even so, she wasn’t quite as close to the two sisters as she was to Maisey.

“Nothing,” Maisey said. “Here, what do you think about the lemon truffle idea?”

Elle started talking about flavorings, and the talk continued. Tasha breathed a sigh of relief. She wasn’t sure why she wanted to keep this thing with Kole a secret. Because it’s nothing serious, she told herself as the others rattled on about whether coffee or mint was best. But deep down, she knew that wasn’t the reason. She didn’t want to tell them because it would become a huge joke and they’d tease her, and she didn’t want that. This thing with Kole might be short-term, but she was enjoying herself in spite of the bet hovering in the shadows. And she already
knew that even though it would never come to anything, and she was totally going to keep her
heart well away from him, she was going to be disappointed when it came to an end.

When Elle and Caitlin left, she and Maisey went to bed, tired out, but sleep refused to
come, and Tasha lay awake for a while, wondering how Kole was getting on at the twenty-first
birthday party. The birthday girl was a family friend and there would no doubt be lots of young,
nubile women there who would be flirting with the sexy photographer. Would he see any of
them after the party? Sure, they’d both agreed not to date anyone else over the fortnight, but she
didn’t know if he’d pass up on the chance of a hot date because of their…whatever it was.
Relationship didn’t seem like the right word.

*It’s none of your business what he gets up to,* she tried to tell herself. But her eyes refused
to close, nevertheless.

Just a few minutes later, though, as if he could read her mind, her phone buzzed to
announce the arrival of a text. She reached over and swiped the screen, and sure enough, his
name appeared.

She read the message.

*Help! I need rescuing! There are twenty giggling girls here. It’s like a fucking hen night.*
She chuckled and texted back. *Sounds like your idea of heaven.*

*It’s a fucking nightmare. I have a headache. Why do girls have to screech so much?*
She laughed. *Poor Kole. Can’t handle a bunch of girls. You’re getting old, dude.*

*Joke all you like. I might not make it out alive.*
She bit her lip. Jealousy had never been an emotion she’d had to deal with before, but it
reared up like a grizzly bear inside her at the thought of all those slim, pretty women draped over
him.

*Her phone beeped. You still there?*

She decided to be honest. *I’m sulking at the thought of you with twenty other women.*

He came back immediately. *Only one girl for me, babe. Not even a question. A hundred
percent, remember?*

She tingled all over. *Wish you were here.*

*God, me too. Miss you.*

She snuggled down into the pillow, pulling the duvet close around her. *Me too.*

*See you Wednesday.*
Yeah. Bye.

Kiss, kiss. He finished with a smiley face.

Tasha clipped the phone shut, curled up, and soon dozed off.

She dreamed about him on and off all night, haunted by the memory of his arms around her, his mouth on hers, and awoke the next morning irritated, unfulfilled, and frustrated. And she was late getting up again, so she couldn’t even take the time to relieve herself of the ache between her thighs before she had to go to work.

All day, she felt in a sort of fever, unable to shake him from her mind. At work, Maisey chattered on about the concert that evening, but Tasha couldn’t drum up any enthusiasm.

“Are you coming down with something?” Maisey asked her at one point, pressing the back of her fingers to Tasha’s forehead. “Your eyes look glazed.”

Tasha had been daydreaming about Kole leaning over her, demanding she roll onto her front, and she came very close to blushing again. “Um…”

Maisey’s lips twisted. “Look. As you’re obviously not feeling well…” Her eyes told Tasha that she knew perfectly well what was wrong with her. “Why don’t I ask Caitlin to come with me tonight?"

Tasha opened her mouth to protest, but stopped at Maisey’s smile. “I don’t even know if he’s home tonight,” she finished lamely. “Maybe he has a hot date.”

Maisey gave her a wry look. “If he dates anyone else while he’s seeing you, he’ll get it in the ear from me. Anyway, he will be home later—I spoke to him after lunch. His last appointment is at six. He’ll be back home by seven at the latest.”

Tasha bit her lip. “I was really looking forward to the concert.”

Maisey squeezed her arm. “I know. But this is important. We need that shop.” Her eyes searched Tasha’s, and Tasha swallowed nervously. Was Maisey aware the shop hadn’t even entered her mind?

All afternoon, she toyed with whether she should go to the concert or see Kole. She considered texting him to discuss it, but decided against it. She had to make up her own mind first.

Maisey went ahead and rung Caitlin to ask whether she’d like to go with her, though, and Tasha could hear the answering scream of delight through the phone, so in the end the decision was made for her.
At five, they went home, but Maisey left soon after to pick Caitlin up before heading off for the hour’s drive to the west coast. Tasha took a long bath, washed her hair, pampered and preened, and finally made herself admit she was preparing herself for a guy.

She put makeup on.

Took it off again.

Put a dusting of powder and a slick of lip gloss back on.

Hovered her hand over her lenses, then chose her glasses.

Stood in front of her wardrobe for ages staring at her clothes. Trailed her fingers over the few skirts she owned, remembering the way he’d slowly lifted her dress, his fingers brushing her thighs. And finally chose jeans and a tight white T, not quite her usual black or khaki, but easy to convince herself she wasn’t making an effort.

Seven thirty found her drawing up outside Kole’s house, and she parked and got out nervously. His car was out the front, so he must be home. However, when she knocked on the door he didn’t answer.

Maybe he was on his way back from a run—she knew he went out every day. Would he be pleased to see her? If she saw the slightest hint of irritation on his face, she’d pretend she was just passing by and head straight off.

She sat on the front wall surrounding the pretty front garden, and tried to convince herself she was doing the right thing.
Chapter Seventeen

Kole’s trainers pounded the road, settling easily into a fast rhythm that matched the loud music blaring through his earphones. *Nothing like a little Foo Fighters to get the heart pumping.* In the beginning, he sang occasionally as he ran, but after a while the songs became white noise in the background as his brain turned to other matters.

Namely, Tasha. An irritated groan accompanied his next exhalation. He’d thought about little else all day, and had worked himself up into a fine lather by the time he arrived home. *You’re like a fucking frisky dog that needs taking for a long walk,* he’d told himself, and had tugged on his running shoes instead of going to take a shower so he could relieve himself of the erection that had sprung to life on and off all day every time he thought about her.

It wasn’t working though. He could have run all thirteen hundred miles from Cape Reinga to Invercargill and it wouldn’t have stopped him feeling horny. Unfortunately, his mind kept painting pictures of her: beneath him, on top of him, a glimmer in the darkness, of her breasts with their beautiful swollen nipples that begged to be sucked. He could almost taste her, hot and sweet, and hear her cries as he thrust into her.

*Fucking hell.* How was it possible to get an erection when he was running flat out?

Sweat ran down his back, stained the chest of his light gray T-shirt with a dark V. He pushed himself hard, took the hills faster than normal, and by the time he turned the corner toward his house, his heart was pounding, his blood racing around his body.

He slowed to a walk at the end of the road, stopping for a moment to bend over with hands on knees in the cool evening air. He was getting too old for this. One way or another, he’d give himself a heart attack if Tasha Wilde didn’t stop haunting him.

He pushed himself upright, longing for a cold shower. For a moment, he thought his poor, tortured mind had conjured her up. She sat on the front wall, legs stretched out, arms folded, but stood as he approached and tucked her hands into the pockets of her jeans.

Heart still pounding, although it should be slowing by now, he stood in front of her, conscious of how he must look, hot, sweaty, and panting. *Very suave.*

“Hey,” he said.
She didn’t reply, just stared at him. He licked his lips and wiped his hand across his mouth, wishing he’d brought a water bottle, saw her glance at his T-shirt, and realized she was looking at the sweat-stained patches. Jeez.

“What are you doing here?” he asked, running a hand through his wet hair. “Thought you’d gone to the concert.”

She shook her head, but still didn’t say anything. He studied her, wondering what the matter was, hands on hips as he continued to try and catch his breath. She looked more like the old Tasha, in jeans and a white T-shirt, wearing her glasses. But all he could see was the way the cotton stretched across her breasts. How the denim had creased at the junction of her thighs. The glisten of her lips, which would be sticky with the gloss.

He turned away. If he carried on like that, he’d be throwing her on the lawn and doing her in the garden.

“Come in.” He took the keys from the pocket of his shorts and unlocked the front door, then stood back to let her in. She walked past him, eyes lowered. She still hadn’t said anything. Why was she there? Was she about to tell him it was all over?

Hoping that wasn’t the case, he followed her in, closed the door, and went straight to the fridge. After retrieving a small bottle of water, he drank half of it in one go, then gave a long sigh, wiping his mouth again as he turned to her.

He stopped. Her chest rose and fell quickly, as if she was the one who’d just run for forty minutes. Her eyes were wide, intense. His gaze fell to the breasts that heaved with each breath, and when his eyes returned to hers, her lips had parted.

And suddenly, he understood.

He wasn’t sure who moved first, but within a second they’d closed the distance, and his mouth was on hers.

A day’s worth of longing and frustration poured into the kiss he gave her, and he pushed her up against the worktop, groaning as her soft body pressed against his rapidly hardening one. It was like buying two scoops of chocolate ice cream on a searingly hot day, and he just wanted to sink his mouth into her, to let his senses run wild, to plunge into her wet flesh until she screamed for release.
Her hand clutched his hair, and he snapped out of the sexual fog that had descended around him and cursed as he remembered his hair was damp with sweat, the same as his clothing. He must smell awful.

He tore his lips away from hers. “Let me have a shower.” His voice was hoarse with passion. “I’ll be a minute, tops.”

She shook her head and moved back. After removing her glasses, she slid out the clip holding up her hair, then grabbed the bottom of her T-shirt and ripped it off. He did the same, heart racing, and followed with his shorts, which dropped on top of her jeans. In seconds, their underwear joined the pile. He grabbed his wallet from the table and yanked out the lone condom, ripped open the packet, and rolled it on.

Tasha looked over her shoulder as if wondering where she could lie down, but Kole already knew where he wanted her. He put his hands under her butt and lifted her onto the worktop, pushed open her knees, and guided himself into her.

In one smooth thrust, he was up to the hilt. No tightness or friction this time.

Tasha fell back onto her elbows and tipped her face up to look at the ceiling, her dark hair spilling across the counter like melted chocolate. “Oh, thank God, at last.”

Her heartfelt words heated him up almost as much as her body. She’d been hot for him, too. *How fucking wonderful.*

He ran his hands over her naked body, cupped her breasts, then leaned forward to take one of her soft nipples in his mouth. It felt like sucking on a truffle, so soft and velvety, hardening like chocolate placed in the fridge to a peak in his mouth. He did the same to the other one, enjoying her answering moan of pleasure, then pushed himself upright, unable to hold back the thrust of his hips any longer.

It took him less than thirty seconds to come, which would have been embarrassing except that when he circled his thumb on the swollen bud between her legs, she beat him to the finish line by a whisker. Her muscles gripped him, helping him along, and he shuddered into her, their skin sticking together, hot and slick.

His heart rate gradually slowed, and he opened his eyes.

“Fuck,” she said, looking dazed.

He laughed. “Yeah.” He slid out of her, grabbed a piece of kitchen roll and disposed of the condom, then pulled her to a sitting position and into his arms.
She rested her head on his chest, and he kissed her hair. He really needed a shower. Her nose was almost under his armpit, and he was shocked she wasn’t recoiling in disgust.

“Sorry,” he murmured. “I’m sure I smell revolting.”
“Mmm, nothing wrong with fresh sweat.” She turned her head and pressed her nose against his chest, inhaling, then raised a hand to his chin and pushed up gently to tip his head back. She ran her tongue over his Adam’s apple, then down to the hollow underneath, murmuring with approval as she tasted him.

Kole closed his eyes, holding his breath as she pressed her lips along his collarbone, then back to the base of his throat. At last, a girl who felt the same way about sex he did, that there was nothing wrong with it being hot and sweaty and hard.

He lowered his head as she lifted hers, and she looked up, her eyebrows rising. She chuckled. “What?”

“Any more of that and I’ll be starting all over again.”

“Can’t say I’d be disappointed.”

He laughed and disengaged himself, and picked up his sweaty clothing. “I really need a shower.”

She retrieved her own clothes. “Can I watch?”

He grinned. “If you like.”

So she followed him into the bathroom and dressed while he showered. She chatted away, but he could feel her gaze on him as he soaped his body and tipped back his head to rinse the shampoo from his hair.

When he stepped out, dripping, onto the mat, she was ready with a towel and started to dry his chest. “I need a cold shower myself now,” she said.

He took the towel from her and finished the job, then walked through to the bedroom to pull on a pair of shorts. “You’re easily pleased.”

“You’re only noticing now?”

Kole laughed and held out his hand. “Want a drink?”

“Sure.” She took his hand, and he led her out to the kitchen.

He finished off the bottle of water, then retrieved two wine glasses from the cupboard.

“White?” he asked. Girls usually preferred white.

She found her glasses and slid them on. “Red if you have it.”
He reached for the bottle. “You’re the ideal girl. You know that?”
“I’ve been trying to tell everyone that for years.”
He chuckled and poured them both a glass, and they carried them out onto the deck.
He sat on one of the chairs and put his feet up on the balustrade, his body feeling loose and sated. “I’m glad you came over.”
She took the chair beside him and did the same, stretching out her legs and crossing her ankles. “I’m glad. I nearly didn’t. I wasn’t sure if you’d want me around.”
He frowned, puzzled. “Why wouldn’t I?”
She shrugged and sipped her wine. “I don’t want to…intrude. I know we’re ‘dating’—” she put air quotes around the word “—but we’re not…you know…intimate.” She met his gaze, and her lips curved at his raised eyebrow. “Well, okay, we’re intimate, but you know what I mean.” She seemed flustered.
“I told you, for these eight days, you get a hundred percent of me,” he said. “Like it or not, I’m yours to do with as you will.”
Her eyes glazed over. “Mmm…”
His body stirred with desire. Already? “Okay, what’s going through your mind now?”
“Melted chocolate. And possibly whipped cream.”
“Oh.” His mind spun. “Who’s doing the licking?”
“Licking? I was talking about dinner. What were you talking about?”
They both laughed. Easy boy, he thought, willing his erection to go away. Tasha might have appeared keen over the weekend, but most girls appreciated a break between sessions.
“Speaking of dinner,” he said, “have you eaten?”
“No. I was too nervous.” She bit her lip as if she hadn’t meant to admit that.
He smiled. “Want to walk down to the fish and chip shop?”
“You could cook me something.” Her eyes twinkled behind her glasses.
“I don’t think you’d appreciate microwaved pasta.” He finished off his wine. “Come on. You’ve given me an appetite.” And not just for food. He didn’t add the words, but when they went into the kitchen and she bent to pull on her sandals, giving him a great view of her butt in the tight jeans, he had to scold his body to behave.
They walked down the winding road to the fish and chip shop and bought a couple of scoops of chips and two pieces of hoki, and picked at them as they walked along the waterfront.
It was nearly seven thirty, and the sun was sinking into the ocean, the harbor flooded with orange and gold.

“I love it here,” Tasha said, pausing to look down at the boats.

Kole ate a hot chip and blew on his fingers. “You never considered staying in Auckland after going to uni then?”

“No. I hate Auckland. I’m not a city girl.” She ate a piece of white fish absently, and he watched her suck her fingers clean. Down boy. “Besides,” she said, clearly unaware of how sexy she looked as her tongue slid down her thumb, “Fox had already started up Aqua Blue, and he asked me to help out for a while. It was nice to have a job, especially considering so many of my peers were struggling to find work.”

“You didn’t stay there though? At Aqua Blue, I mean. Why?”

“Because Fox’s a bastard to work for,” she said, continuing to walk, and he fell in beside her. “A complete slave driver. I could cope with a normal boss cracking the whip, but my own brother…it was never going to work. We clashed all the time.”

“Is that when you came up with the idea for Treats?”

“Well, Maisey and I have talked about having a confectionery shop for years, but yes, we started discussing it seriously when I left Aqua and Maisey came back up here. We’d met Elle and Caitlin at uni, you see, and when we told them about our idea, they were immediately enthusiastic. It should work well because we all bring something different to the table.”

“What do Elle and Caitlin bring?”

“Elle’s specialty is ice-cream. She’s obsessed with it, and she’s always coming up with new flavors. Caitlin has a real knack for coffee—she’s the best barista out of the four of us, knows all the different types, and she can tell you where a coffee bean comes from just by smelling it—don’t ask me how. It’s perfect, really, because Maisey and I have always concentrated on chocolate, and the three go together so well.”

“What does Maisey herself bring to the party? Sparkly nail varnish?”

She laughed. “Maisey has fantastic ideas. Sometimes they’re a bit too way out there and we have to rein her in, but usually she comes up with stuff I couldn’t imagine if I had a year to think about it. She just needs someone to put it into practice, and that’s where I come in.”

He stopped, screwed up the newspaper, and threw it into a nearby bin. Then he faced her, hands in his pockets. “Miss Practical, eh?”
“Kinda.” She smiled and dumped the rest of her paper in the bin. Then she glanced to her left and fell quiet.

Kole followed her gaze, his heart jolting as he saw where they were standing—right outside the shop. He hadn’t even realized where their feet had taken them. *You stupid fucking arse.*

He looked back at Tasha, and her cool eyes surveyed him. *Dammit.* Had he brought the lovely evening to an end?
Chapter Eighteen

They both turned and stared at the shop.

*I shouldn’t have eaten all the fish,* Tasha thought. Her stomach clenched uneasily, and she felt slightly sick.

She’d totally forgotten about the shop as they wandered along the waterfront. How weird was that? She’d been too busy enjoying Kole’s company, still caught up in the afterglow of their frantic sex session. Her body tingled at the memory of his hot skin sticking to hers, but she pushed it away.

The shop looked neat and clean, like a blank slate, full of promise, ready to be made into something amazing. It wouldn’t be long before the owner returned, and then this would all be over.

The late sun bounced off a metal sign, temporarily blinding her, and her eyes watered. She shaded them with a hand. She had to say something—neither of them had spoken for an ice age.

She cleared her throat. “So what are your plans for the place?”

He glanced down at her. She wore flat sandals, and he towered over her, all height and breadth, smelling of fresh body wash, his hair still curling damply around the base of his neck. His eyes were unfathomable, and his smile had vanished.

Was it possible he’d forgotten too? That standing here had given him a mental slap as well? The bet stood between them, as tall and forbidding as if built out of bricks.

“Come on,” she said softly. There was no point in ignoring it. They may be having fun, but there was a purpose to this fling and they shouldn’t forget it. “Which bit had you planned to be your studio before I whisked it out of reach?”

He smiled at that. They walked forward to stand by the window, looking in at the empty, tiled floor, the neat counter to one side.

“It’s smallish,” he said, “but I thought I’d have the studio in the room out the back. I might even discuss with the owner joining that room with the kitchen, as I wouldn’t be using that. Most of the people who’d come in would be families anyway; anything like team photos are taken at the school or sports club, and obviously weddings are done on the spot. Out here,” he indicated the main area of the shop, “I’d like displays of some of my photos, and a selection of albums and
frames as a suggestion of what I can produce. And on that side, I’d put up a thin wall and have a meeting room, where I could sit with clients and discuss their needs.”

“Sounds nice,” she said airily. “Shame you won’t get to put the plan into action.”

His lips curved. “What about you?”

She brought to mind her vision for the shop and illustrated her words with a hand. “We’d have a long counter the length of that wall, with cold cabinets displaying the chocolates and ice cream. The coffee machine would go there. We’d extend the kitchen to take up a good part of the main room, and erect a glass partition so customers could see the food being made. And obviously tables and chairs at the front here—there wouldn’t be room for many, but on nice days we could spill onto the pavement, and it’ll mostly be takeaways anyway.”

It would be perfect. She could see it so clearly she almost felt if she squeezed her eyes tight shut and wished hard enough, she’d open them again and it would all be there ready and waiting for her. Her heart raced.

And then Kole turned away beside her, and she deflated like a popped balloon.

They walked slowly back up to his house. He put his arm around her shoulder and hugged her to his side as they walked, and they talked about this and that. But the sun had nearly set across the harbor, and everything had dulled to gray.

When they reached his house, she stopped and shoved her hands in her pockets. This wasn’t going to work—she needed time to think about what she was doing here. “I think I’ll head home,” she said. “Have an early night.”

Kole studied his shoes for a moment. He seemed to be struggling to phrase his words. Or was she imagining it? Maybe he was just disappointed he wasn’t going to get any more sex that night.

_I want that shop_, he’d said right at the beginning, _and I’m going to get it_. Sure, he’d obviously enjoyed having sex with her, but he was a guy. Guys liked sex. There wasn’t usually much more to it than that. They’d both been determined to turn on the charm, to seduce each other, and even though she was convinced what had sparked between them had surprised them both, she didn’t think for a second he had anything other than winning this bet on his mind.

“Tomorrow?” she said.

He looked back up at her then. His eyes were cool, and it felt like he’d erected a barrier, like a cashier in a bank with a glass partition between her and the customer. “Sure.”
Tasha hesitated. A small piece of her had hoped he’d ask her to stay, tell her to forget about the shop, that he wanted her regardless of the bet. But that wasn’t going to happen. It annoyed and upset her in equal measure. Clearly, he’d enjoyed her company. Why couldn’t he admit it?

But she refused to let him know it had affected her. She pinned a bright smile on her face. “Okay, see you later, then.” Not wanting to leave on a bad note, she moved closer and reached up to press a quick kiss on his cheek. *Please don’t pull away.*

But as her lips touched his bristles, he turned his head so his mouth met hers. And then his arms came around her, and he tightened them, pinning her to him as he kissed her back hungrily.

She closed her eyes, disgusted with herself for taking whatever he was willing to give, but unable to pull back. Was the kiss his way of illustrating he didn’t want her to go, without actually saying the words?

When he finally lifted his head, she laid a hand on his chest for a moment, her forehead against his chin and her eyes closed, feeling the thud of his heart beneath her palm. His lips touched her hair, gentle, affectionate.

Then she moved back. She flashed him a smile, turned, and walked to her car.

He waved her goodbye, but when she drove away and looked in her rear view mirror, he’d gone.

By the time she arrived home, she was fighting back tears of irritation and anger at the whole idiotic situation, at her stupid female hormones, at Kole’s stubborn refusal to admit he felt anything for her, at the world in general.

She let herself in and slammed the door behind her, only then realizing Maisey was home, sitting on the sofa and looking startled at the loud crash.

“*Kia ora,*” Maisey said, a typical New Zealand greeting.

Tasha scowled. Then she spotted Maisey’s fluffy onesie and her pale face, free of makeup. Maisey never went out without makeup. “What are you doing here? What happened to the concert?”

“The bloody thing was called off! Singer came down with the flu.” Maisey rolled her eyes and sipped from the glass of wine in her hand. “Good job Caitlin checked their website before we left.” She narrowed her eyes. “What are you doing here? I thought I was going to have a nice quiet evening, not have you banging doors all over the place. Where’s Kole?”
“Home.” Tasha let out a long sigh. She went into the kitchen and retrieved herself a glass, then came back to sit beside Maisey and pour herself some wine.

“Problem?” Maisey asked.

“Yes. No. I don’t know. Not really.”

“Well, I’m glad we cleared that up.”

Tasha stared moodily into her glass. “He’s being a dick.”

“You’re only just figuring that out? I had him sussed years ago.”

Tasha gave a small laugh. “Sorry about the concert.”

“Meh. I’d only have been shattered tomorrow. You know I’m normally in bed by nine.”

Maisey surveyed her critically. “So come on, tell me what happened.”

“I can hardly talk to you about it,” Tasha complained. “First, you’re his sister, and second, you’re one of the judges in the stupid bet. You’ll use it as ammunition against me.”

“Give me some credit, Tash. The whole thing is a farce. I very much doubt Kole had any intention of giving up the shop when he agreed to the bet. No matter what happens between you two, he’d only deny it, and I think you know that. It was an excuse for you to finally get your hands on him.”

“It wasn’t!” Tasha glared at her.

Maisey glared back.

“It really wasn’t,” Tasha said again, more softly. “I’ve known him a long time, and I’d never considered us getting together until now. I honestly suggested the bet because he annoyed me with his arrogant assumption he could get any girl to fall for him. I thought maybe he’d underestimated the power of friendship, and if we got to know each other...you know...more intimately, he might admit to more than a physical attraction for someone.”

“That’s very self-sacrificing of you,” Maisey said. “So it had nothing to do with you thinking he’s hot, then?”

Tasha opened her mouth to deny it, but couldn’t. Her lips curved, and Maisey grinned in response.

“There’s nothing wrong with that,” Maisey announced. “He might be my brother, and you were right—he is the most annoying man on the planet at times, but he is hot. I can’t deny it. I’m just amazed you stayed out of his clutches so long.”
“I’m not in his clutches.” Tasha sulked. “I meant what I said—women are perfectly capable of having a sexual relationship without getting emotionally entangled.” She thought about when he’d jogged up the road and stopped to catch his breath, leaning forward with his hands on his knees. Just the sight of him had caused her heart to race, and as for when he’d stared at her in the kitchen, crushed her to him, and then lifted her onto the worktop…

She blinked and focused on Maisey’s raised eyebrows. “I’m fine,” she said. “It’s just that when we’re together, I think we both forget about the bet, but earlier we walked down to the waterfront and found ourselves standing in front of the shop, and it kind of shocked us we’d forgotten. At least, I think it shocked him. There’s no telling, really.”

“Want me to ask him?”

“No! Absolutely not. I do not want him thinking for one moment I’m hooked. I’d never live it down. And I’m not. Hooked, that is. I’m just…” She’d lost her train of thought, too distracted by the memory that played over and over in her head like a DVD of him all hot and sweaty in her arms. “I mean…”

“Jeez.” Maisey topped up Tasha’s wine glass. “Do you need to lie down?”

“Ha ha.” Tasha gulped a mouthful of the wine, then leaned back and sighed. “I just want him to admit he likes me. I’m not looking for a declaration of love or a proposal or anything. I want him to show some sign he’s not a complete robot without any feelings whatsoever.”

“He’s no robot.” Maisey curled her legs under her. “You know that ring he wears on his right hand?”

Tasha remembered noticing it on the beach. “It’s Harry’s isn’t it?”

“Yeah. He wears it to remind himself of the foolishness of love. Not only did Harry die because his girlfriend had broken up with him. He died young, before he’d really had a chance to do anything. Kole’s terrified of wasting his life, and maybe ending up in a relationship where the passion has faded and all that’s left are a ball and chain, a hefty mortgage, and years of dull commitment and responsibility.”

Tasha mused on that. “He told you that’s why he wears Harry’s ring?”

“No.”

“Then how…” Tasha trailed off at the look in her best friend’s eyes. Maisey could understand because they were brother and sister, and she knew Kole well enough to guess his reaction to Harry’s death. Plus, maybe she felt the same way a little, too.
“Sorry,” Tasha whispered. She couldn’t imagine how awful it must feel to lose a sibling. “Don’t assume he’s cold and thoughtless. He has feelings. He’s quite emotional actually,” Maisey said. “He just doesn’t like showing it.”

“Emotional?” Tasha smirked. “He wouldn’t appreciate you saying that.” “He hides it well, and pretends nothing affects him, but it does. My guess is he likes you a lot, and he’s having trouble hiding it.” Maisey sipped her wine.

Tasha waved her hand. She couldn’t believe Kole was soft on her. He liked having sex, that much was clear, but she was pretty convinced she’d been the first port in a storm, the only one to hand. She couldn’t imagine she was anything special.

“What are you doing tomorrow?” Maisey asked. “Are you seeing him?”

“We arranged it, originally. I’m not sure now.” She shifted uncomfortably, unsure whether she ought to continue with the charade.

“Caitlin had a great idea,” Maisey said. “There’s a quiz night at Bait & Hook.” She named their local bar. “Fox actually has the night off.”

“Jeez. It’s a miracle.” Fox hardly ever had a night off.

“Yeah. And Joss has persuaded Stuart to come. It’s for teams of eight, so we’ll be settled if you and Kole join us.”

“I don’t know…”

Maisey tipped her head. “How about I get Joss to persuade Kole? And you come with me?”

Tasha relented. “Okay.” She loved quizzes, and it would give her the chance to meet up with Kole without it being a proper date. Maybe by then she would have sorted out her feelings for him.

Although somehow, she thought it might take a bit longer than that.

“Cool,” Maisey said. “I’ll get Joss onto it tomorrow.”
Chapter Nineteen

Kole stretched out his legs and took a long swig from the beer bottle. Joss had talked him into coming to the quiz night, but he hadn’t been looking forward to it. Now he was here, though, he had to admit it promised to be a fun night. Joss, Fox, Caitlin, and Elle were in the middle of a conversation about the All Blacks rugby match against Australia at the weekend. Stuart sat listening, quiet it was true, but at least Kole had persuaded him out of the house. Only Maisey and Tasha hadn’t turned up yet. The twenty or so tables placed around the bar were filling up, and it made a change to be out midweek.

Jeez, dude, you’re getting old. Gone were the nights at uni and the few years after, when he’d be out every evening with friends and still have enough energy to get up early the next day and do it all over again. At some point, the appeal of living life to the max had worn off. When he’d first moved back up to Mangonui, he’d steeled himself for it to be a temporary relocation, sure it would prove to be too quiet both in his personal and business life. But the studio had taken off more quickly than he’d anticipated, and he’d found it oddly relaxing to return to the laid-back Northland, where the sun always seemed to shine and the most important things on any person’s mind were the sea, surf, and having a good time. The feeling had only intensified once he’d bought his house, and he loved going home at night and lying on the sofa in front of the TV, or sitting at his computer and working on his photographs.

Was he ready to settle down? He wanted to scoff at the thought. Kole Graham with a mortgage, wife, and kids? Never! He’d always backed away from it, too scared of making a mistake and choosing someone that ultimately ended up being incompatible. All relationships were exciting to begin with, but eventually the shine wore off and the couple became complacent, losing respect for one another, and growing angry with their partner because they’d lost the buzz. And as carefree as he may have been in his love life, Kole didn’t believe in cheating on a girl, and he did believe in monogamy. When—if—he ever decided to settle down, it would be with one girl, and he would be faithful to her.

The thought didn’t enthuse him. Serial monogamy was the only answer. That way he didn’t have the chance to grow bored, and he didn’t have to worry he was committing himself to the wrong woman.
Thinking of women brought his thoughts around to Tasha. Her image had hovered in the wings of his mind frequently over the last few days, venturing in to surprise him when he least expected it. He missed her. And that worried him. They had three days of their bet to go, and even though their fling had been brief, she’d had more of an effect on him than any other girl he’d dated for a long time, if ever.

He picked at the label on his beer bottle, pondering on that. Ultimately, it was to be expected. They’d been friends for a long time, so that had obviously increased the intimacy of their relationship, which normally took a while to build up. And although he often acted as though he didn’t have a heart, he did have feelings. He liked her. And that wasn’t a problem, as long as he kept it to himself.

“Some bimbo’s probably worn him out.” The words intruded into his musings.

He looked up to see them all watching him, amused. “Huh?”

Caitlin grinned. “Fox asked you a question and you didn’t answer. I was just saying some blonde bimbo with boobs bigger than her IQ has probably worn you out.”

His lips curved as they all laughed, and he took a swig from the bottle. “Not quite.”

“Are you dating anyone at the moment?” Stuart asked.

“Sort of.” He was saved from further questioning by the arrival of Maisey and Tasha.

Twenty seconds of bustle ensued as everyone greeted everyone else, Fox bought another round of drinks, and the company settled around the table, squeezing together on bar stools so they could all fit in.

Kole sat across the table from Tasha, and he met her gaze as she made herself comfortable on the stool.

“Hey,” she said. She wore jeans and a tight, bright orange T-shirt that brought out the orange in her irises. Sipping her wine, she looked over her glasses at him and winked.

“Hey,” he said back, smiling, the wink lifting his spirits.

“What’s going on?” Maisey asked, looking bright and bubbly in jeans and a baby pink T-shirt with the word ‘Sexy’ outlined in sequins on the front.

“We were just talking about Kole’s love life,” Caitlin said. “He looks knackered. I reckon someone’s worn him out.”

“Who is it?” Elle asked. “Is she gorgeous? And do we get to meet her?”
“None of your business, yes, and not in a million years.” Kole reached out and took the entry booklet from the organizer of the evening who’d approached the table. “I wouldn’t let anyone I care for within an inch of you lot.” He studied the booklet so he wouldn’t have to meet Joss’s, Tasha’s, or Maisey’s eyes.

“Oh…” Caitlin clapped her hands. “So you care for her then? How exciting!” Kole glared at her, and she widened her eyes and mimed zipping up her mouth. Maisey stifled a snort of laughter, so he glared at her, too.

He didn’t dare look at Tasha.

Picking up a pen, he clicked it on and wrote their table number at the top. “What name are we going to give ourselves?”

“Great mates,” Caitlin said. “With the numbers.” He wrote it down, Gr8 M8s.

“We could do well this evening,” Tasha said, and proceeded to tick them all off on her fingers. “Joss brings medical stuff, Stuart does literature, Elle’s great at anything with sport, Fox does food, Caitlin can answer anything on music, Maisey can do celebrity questions, I’m okay with some history…” She pointed to finger number eight, looked at Kole, and pretended to think. “Hmm, what do you bring?” Her eyes danced.

“Great hair?” he suggested. They all laughed.

“I’ve heard you’re pretty good at biology,” Tasha said impishly. Kole met her gaze and held it. The minx. “I haven’t had any complaints so far.” She sipped her wine, stifling a laugh, and he took another swig of his beer. So, she was in that sort of mood, was she? His heart rate picked up a little. He’d wondered whether she was going to call an end to the bet, but it looked as if she might still be interested in seeing him again. His gaze lingered on her breasts, outlined nicely in the tight T-shirt. Lust surged through him. Would she agree to go home with him for the night?

The organizer called for quiet, and the quiz began.

There wasn’t much chance for conversation for a while. The questions came thick and fast, and they spent most of their time arguing over the answers.

Kole surprised himself by enjoying the evening. He’d thought it might be a tiresome affair, but his friends were great company, and everyone seemed in good spirits. Tasha was fun and
flirty, not overtly so, but enough to stir his blood and make him want to push her up against the wall and kiss her senseless. He couldn’t stop picturing her in bed, moving on top of him, or groaning with pleasure beneath him, and every time she glanced at him, he felt a surge of desire that fed his lust until he felt in a sexual haze.

At half time, when the organizer called for a break, Tasha rose from the table and excused herself to visit the ladies’. Kole waited a minute, then followed her through the quieter side room and along the corridor to the toilets.

He hovered outside, leaning against the wall, until she came out.

She stopped abruptly when she saw him. “Oh!”

“Hello.”

She stood in front of him, hands in her pockets, eyes bright. “The gents’ is that door,” she said, pointing.

“I came to see you.”

She lifted her chin. “Why?”

He moved a little closer, passion surging through him at the sight of her challenging gaze.

“Stop teasing me.”

“Teasing you?” She fluttered her eyelashes like a coquettish nineteenth-century debutante. “You know perfectly well what you’re doing. You’re riling me up.”

Her lips curved. “Am I now?”

“You are, and it’s not fair. I’m a guy. I’m easily riled.”

She gave a mock sigh. “Aw, but it’s such fun.”

“You’ll regret it,” he murmured, lifting a hand and stroking her cheek with the back of his fingers.

She licked her lips. “Is that a promise?”

“Maybe.” He was hard enough to be used as a battering ram. “I want you.”

Her eyebrows rose, and her lips parted. “Oh?”

“Come home with me tonight.”

She looked over her shoulder, and then she took his hand and led him farther along the corridor. He followed, frowning, unsure of her destination—the only room ahead was the large bathroom for disabled patrons.

She pulled him into the room, closed the door behind him, and locked it.
He started to laugh. “What *are* you doing?”

Her eyes were feverishly bright. “I’ll go home with you tonight on one condition.”

“That being…”

“You do exactly as I say, for a change.”

He stared at her. “In what way?”

She turned so her back was against the wall. Took off her glasses and slid them into her pocket. Reaching down, she took both his hands in hers. Then, to his surprise, she pulled them up and placed them on the wall above her shoulders.

“This way.” She started to unbutton his jeans.

“Hey.” Startled, he dropped his hands to stop her, but she caught them again and put them back above her shoulders. “Do as you’re told,” she scolded, returning her hands to his jeans and sliding down the zipper.

“Here?” He looked around. As bathrooms went, it was quite a pleasant one, spacious and bright, with wood paneling and floral curtains, but even so… “This is hardly the place.”

“Why?” She pulled the elastic of his boxers down and released his eager erection.

“Well, someone might want to use the room…”

She laughed. “I’m sure they can wait two minutes. I’ll be surprised if you last longer than that. I’m very good.” She licked her lips.

He closed his eyes as her hand massaged him. “No…”

“Your mouth says no, but the rest of you says yes.” She reached up and brushed her lips against his. “You told me you wanted to fuck my mouth. Well, now’s your chance.”

“It’s not very romantic,” he said faintly, worried she’d feel bad later about what she’d done in a semi-public place.

She gave a low laugh, reached to her right, and flicked off the light, plunging them into darkness. “That better?” She slid down his body to her knees, and took him in her mouth.

“Holy fuck.” He clenched his jaw hard. He felt as if he’d descended into a tub of black treacle. Everything had vanished and his senses were useless; the only thing in the world was Tasha’s mouth, hot and wet around him.

He held his breath as she explored him with her tongue, stroking him slowly with her hand as she did so.

“Tasha…” he said with a groan, swelling in her palm until it almost hurt.
She removed her mouth and spoke softly. “I’ll show you how deep you can go. And then it’s up to you. I won’t break, honey.” She placed her lips over the tip and then slid them along his shaft, all the way down, it seemed, until he hit the back of her throat.

His hands curled into fists on the wall. “Fuck.”

She murmured her approval at his choice of word, and her hand resting on his butt tightened, encouraging him to thrust.

He did so, unable to stop himself, groaning repeatedly at the sensation of plunging into her warm wet mouth. Her tongue stroked around him, teasing, arousing him further, sliding beneath the tip as her hand massaged him with just the right amount of pressure. She was right—she was good. He wasn’t even going to make her two minute estimate. Tensed up before she’d pulled him into the room, he didn’t stand a chance.

Even though he tried to hold back, his hips thrust him deeper into her mouth, and she gave a long, low moan of pleasure that proved his undoing. Her hand moved faster, harder. Deep inside him, muscles began to tighten and spasm.

“Stop if you don’t want me to come in your mouth,” he whispered hurriedly, dropping a hand to her head.

But she didn’t stop, just took him deeper until her nose brushed his pubic hair, and that was it—heat rushed through him and he climaxed. She continued to suck, her throat muscles working as she drank him down, and his fingers tightened in her hair as surge after surge erupted into her mouth.

When he’d done, she lifted her head and pushed a tissue into his hand. Sighing, he cleaned himself up and rearranged his clothing as she stood and flicked on the lights.
Laughter bubbled forth from Tasha’s lips at the look of exasperation on Kole’s face.

“For fuck’s sake,” he said, running a hand through his hair. “Everyone will be wondering where we are.”

She chuckled. “Is that a complaint?”

His eyes were bright as stars, full of admiration. “You’re fucking amazing.”

“Thank you.” She pressed her lips to his.

He pulled a face. “Yuck.”

“Oh, so it’s different when I do it to you?” she said, remembering when he’d done exactly the same after going down on her.

“Absolutely. You taste nice.”

She licked her lips. “So do you. Goes lovely with my salt and vinegar crisps.” The exasperated look returned, and she couldn’t hide her laughter.

He pulled her into his arms and held her tightly. Tasha snuggled up to him, loving his warmth, his strength, and the taste of him in her mouth. He wore a black Nirvana T-shirt that was obviously fresh on that night, because it smelled of clean washing powder, along with the warm scent of his aftershave.

“Say you’ll come home with me,” he said huskily, repeating his earlier request. “I miss you.”

His admission brought a lump to her throat. “I miss you too.”

“Will you, then? Come home with me?”

She pulled back and looked up into his eyes. She’d missed him, and he’d said he’d missed her too. That was probably the closest he’d ever come to admitting to a girl she meant something to him. It was possible he was a really, really good actor and actually didn’t feel anything for her, but she’d known him a long time. He liked her, and she liked him. She wasn’t going to think about the bet anymore.

“Yes,” she whispered.

His face lit up, and that warmed her all the way through. They exchanged a long, slow kiss, although he still refused to get his tongue involved.
She pulled back, laughing, took out her glasses and slid them back on. “Come on. We’d better get back.”

Opening the door a crack, she peered through. “Coast is clear.”

“I’ll call in the gents’ first,” he said.

“Okay.”

She slipped out and went back to the table as the organizer called for everyone to sit for the second half.

Nobody appeared to have noticed they’d been gone longer than usual, although Maisey gave Tasha an odd look as she sat and said, “Everything all right?”

“Fine,” Tasha said breezily, accepting a glass of wine from Stuart, who’d bought the next round. After fumbling in her pocket, she pulled out a tube of lip balm and slicked some over her lips.

Maisey smiled, but she didn’t say anything more.

When Kole returned, though, Maisey’s gaze scanned him, and her eyes narrowed.

“Did you get lost?” she asked.

Kole just sent her a wry look. Tasha took a mouthful of wine to try and hide her amusement.

Maisey looked at her, mischief in her eyes, then gestured at Kole. “Your fly’s undone.”

Tasha coughed, nearly spurted the mouthful of wine across the table, and clapped a hand over her mouth as she swallowed.

“Something go down the wrong way?” Maisey queried, patting her on the back. Tasha shook her head, not trusting herself to speak. Her cheeks burned. Blushing, again! Three times in one week!

Kole checked his jeans, realized his fly wasn’t undone, and glared at his sister.

Maisey just chuckled and turned to talk to Stuart. Kole’s eyes met Tasha’s, though, and they exchanged a long, amused look.

“Warm in here,” Kole said, obviously referring to her flushed face. He winked at her, not appearing at all contrite in spite of Maisey’s teasing.

Tasha lowered her gaze and studied her wine glass, biting her lip. Kole was definitely having an effect on her. She’d always prided herself on never blushing like so many other young
women her age, and men never made her flustered. But here was Kole, turning her into a giggly, blushing fifteen-year-old. How had he managed that?

The organizer started calling out the next round of questions, and Tasha’s face gradually cooled as the eight of them threw themselves into the quiz. The food they’d ordered arrived—several big bowls of potato wedges with ‘the works’, meaning heaps of wedges topped with grated cheese and bacon, and tons of sour cream and chilli sauce—and everyone tucked in. They all seemed to be having a good time, even Stuart, who answered every question on the literature round, earning himself a cheer from the rest of the team.

Tasha watched him chatting to Elle and Caitlin between rounds. He listened more than he spoke, which wasn’t a problem considering that Caitlin, especially, was happy to fill any gaps in the conversation with her bright chatter, with the gentle Elle there to rein her in when she became too loud.

Tasha had met Stuart’s late wife, Ria, on several occasions, and it been such a shock when she died so young. To her knowledge, he hadn’t dated anyone since. He was too young to stay single forever though. No doubt the notion of dating again felt disloyal, but surely Ria wouldn’t have wanted him to stay single and lonely forever?

Her gaze drifted to Kole, currently arguing with Fox and Caitlin about which rugby player had scored the winning try in the game against South Africa last year. He has feelings, Maisey had told her. My guess is he likes you a lot, and he’s having trouble hiding it. Had Maisey guessed correctly, or was she way off the mark? Seeing how Stuart’s grief had affected him so deeply, she couldn’t believe Harry’s death hadn’t had an impact on Kole, and Maisey certainly seemed to think that was the case.

He had been irreverent even as a teen, not caring what anyone thought of him, and he’d never been one to show much emotion. But in spite of taking great enjoyment in teasing the girls, he’d always had a soft spot for them too. Tasha could remember how, when she was fifteen and her beloved dog had died, he’d wrapped his arms around her and let her cry on his shoulder. And when Lewis had cheated on her and she’d broken up with him, Kole, who’d been away at uni, had rung her and told her in no uncertain terms what he thought of the “fucking bastard”, and insisted she deserved better than him and she should lift her chin up and forget him. Clearly, he did have a heart, even though he tried to hide it.
So did he have feelings for her? Having won his argument with Fox, he was now writing down the answer on the paper in his boyish, slanted handwriting. He had surprisingly long lashes for a guy. He needed a shave, too—he was on the way to growing a beard. Not that she minded. She quite liked the unshaven look.

Harry’s terrible accident, fuelled by an argument with his girlfriend, who—unfortunately for her, considering what happened afterward—had just dumped him, must be a factor in Kole’s current single status, Tasha thought. Presumably at least one of his girlfriends had wanted the relationship to go on longer. Did he never plan to settle down? Perhaps the pain he’d felt after Harry’s accident had irrevocably changed him and meant he’d never be able to bring himself to stay with one woman forever.

Kole finished writing and sat back in his chair, and Tasha dropped her gaze, not wanting him to catch her watching him. She drew a finger through a drop of water on the table. He’d made it quite clear to her that after Andrew returned from Peru, this little fling of theirs was over. She had to remember the reason for their getting together. They were in competition for the shop, and it went no deeper than that. If she let herself think anything else was at stake, he would win and she’d lose both her heart and the shop.

She looked up, and he was watching her, head tipped to one side, one arm hooked over the back of the chair. His lips curved as her gaze met his.

“Penny for them?” he said, handing the answer sheet to the organizer as he passed by.

“I was wondering if you’re consciously going for the Rasputin look.” She fingered her chin.

Everyone laughed, and Kole rubbed his fingers against his cheek. His eyes danced. “I thought girls liked a bit of bristle burn on the thigh.”

All the girls winced, and the guys grinned. “Absolutely not,” Caitlin stated. “Clean shaven all the way, please fellas.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Fox added a lazy salute.

“We aim to please,” Joss said, winking at Maisey, who blushed.

“What about you, Tash?” Kole’s eyes taunted her. “Do you prefer your men beardless?”

She took one of the remaining potato wedges and dipped it into the sour cream, refusing to get embarrassed again. “Not necessarily. I like ’em rough and ready.”
“Talking of which,” Caitlin said, “when’s the last time you dated? You’ll end up with cobwebs down there, Tash, if you don’t give it a good workout every now and again.”

Fox snorted, and everyone else burst out laughing at the look on her face. “Whether my chimney is being swept is nobody else’s business,” Tasha said, only serving to make them laugh even more.

“Perhaps we should change the subject,” Elle suggested, sending Tasha a sympathetic look. “Kole—any news on the shop? Have Tasha and Maisey managed to change your mind?”

Tasha sobered, her amusement dying immediately at the mention of the shop. “Not yet. It’s not for the want of trying though.” Kole glanced at Tasha, then away again.

“Pretty please, with a cherry on top,” Caitlin said. “It would be perfect for us. Would it help if I went down on my knees?” She gave him a mock glare as his eyebrows rose. “To beg, I mean. Jeez.” Still, her cheeky grin was slightly suggestive.

Kole made some dry comment about the bar’s carpet being too rough for that, and everyone else laughed, but Tasha’s heart stumbled, and she swallowed hard against a lump that appeared in her throat. She looked into her glass, trying to force a smile onto her face, but she knew she’d failed. Jealous? How can I be jealous? She’d only been seeing Kole for five days, and it was hardly a long-term relationship. He was perfectly free to flirt with any woman he chose. Plus, they all indulged in jokey sexual banter as a group from time to time, and nobody ever took it seriously.

Still, she was shocked at the pain that appeared in her chest at the thought of him with Caitlin, or with anyone else for that matter.

And then realization sunk in.

Oh no. Surely not.

She couldn’t have gone and fallen in love with him in less than a week?

Under the table, someone’s leg rubbed against hers, and she looked up to see Kole studying her, a curious look on his face. He winked at her, and she flashed him a quick smile before turning her attention to the organizer as he began reading the answers to the final round. But her mind spun, and her pulse pounded rapidly at her temples.

You stupid, stupid girl. What have you done?
The quiz concluded, and the Gr8 M8s were thrilled to discover they’d won second place. They accepted their certificate for a free round of drinks at the next quiz, and then everyone started heading for home.

They all wandered out into the car park, and Tasha said good night to the others. Elle and Caitlin piled into Fox’s car, and Stuart agreed to a lift from Joss.

“You coming?” Maisey asked Tasha as the other cars pulled away.

Tasha hesitated and glanced at Kole. He was leaning against his car a few feet away, arms folded, and he didn’t say anything, just waited for her reply.

She turned back to Maisey. “Um…”

Maisey laughed. “I’ll see you at work tomorrow.” She kissed Tasha on the cheek, waved goodbye to her brother, and got in her car.

Tasha walked slowly over to Kole as Maisey drove away.

“Hey,” he said. His eyes crinkled as he smiled.

“Hey.” Her heart picked up its speed. Was she doing the right thing? This was an idiotic idea if she really thought she might be falling for him.

But he looked so gorgeous standing there in the light from the street lamp, his eyes full of tenderness as he studied her. And she didn’t have the heart to change her mind.

He pushed himself off the car, clicked the button on his key, and the car’s lights flashed. After opening the passenger door, he stood back and indicated for Tasha to climb in.
Chapter Twenty-One

Kole drove home, glancing across occasionally at Tasha, who stared out of the window into the dark night, lost in thought.

He wasn’t quite sure what to say to her. He’d gone to the quiz night aware they’d parted awkwardly after their lovely evening walk had ended up in front of the shop. But Tasha had been in good spirits tonight, and the events in the bathroom had suggested everything was all right between them.

But as the evening had worn on, she’d gradually grown quieter, and her smile had completely disappeared when Elle brought up the matter of the shop again. Why?

Because he was winning. Tasha was developing feelings for him, he was sure of it. It should have made him want to punch the air with triumph. But it only made him sad.

He’d begun the bet by telling her he wasn’t looking for a relationship, and he’d been clear to point out he didn’t want her to blame him when she lost the shop and her heart. He’d been provocative on purpose, and hadn’t really meant the bit about her heart. Eight days was hardly long enough to fall in love, for Christ’s sake, and the tempestuous Tasha had never shown any signs of being the kind of girl to lose her heart easily.

But the look on her face when Caitlin had joked about going down on her knees told him Tasha had feelings for him. Her eyes had flashed with jealousy before she’d lowered her gaze, and since then the way she’d fallen quiet suggested she was musing on her feelings.

Perhaps he should call it a day now. Sleeping together for another four nights could only make things worse, and he didn’t want to lose her friendship.

But as he glanced at her and saw the curve of her neck, her pale skin, the swell of her breasts in the tight T-shirt, he longed to press his lips below her ear, to crush her to him, and to pleasure her like she’d pleasured him not so long ago.

Ending this might be the most sensible course of action. But Kole wasn’t in a sensible mood. Perhaps it was the full moon, or the thought of what had happened in the bathroom, the way her lips had closed around him, her mouth hot and wet. But his blood was up, and he wanted her.

He reached across and held her hand where it rested on her thigh. “So here’s what we’re going to do when we get in.”
She looked across at him, frowning. “Hmm?”
“I’m going to get us both a drink. Open the bar of chocolate in the fridge. And we’re going to sit in front of the TV for a while and relax.”
“Okay.” The moonlight slanting through the car painted her cheeks white, and highlighted her wide eyes beneath her glasses. Her chest rose and fell rapidly. Was she worried? Frightened? Or aroused?
“Then,” he said, hoping it was the latter but deciding to keep things light just in case, “we’ll go to bed, and you’re going to have the best sex of your life.”
That made her laugh. “Mr. Confident,” she said. “I don’t know how you’re always so sure of yourself.”
“When I start getting complaints, I’ll change my point of view.” He winked at her.
She chuckled. “So what does this best sex of my life involve?”
Pleased her frown had lifted, he pretended to think about it. “Well, I felt guilty our last session together was kind of rushed.”
“Kind of? Kole, we both came in about thirty seconds.”
“Exactly. That’s not a complaint, by the way, fast sex when you’re hot for someone can be the best. But tonight, as a thank you for earlier—” and he cast her a quick, wry glance “—it would be nice to slow things down, and take the time to…appreciate each other, shall we say.”
They approached his house, and he steered the car into the driveway, stopped, and turned the key. The engine died, and evening noises replaced it, the hoot of a morepork from the trees, the sound of laughter from somewhere in the harbor, people out enjoying the evening.
“Kole…”
He looked across at her. “Mmm?”
She nibbled her bottom lip. Affection surged through him at the girlish action. Not wanting her to say she’d changed her mind and would rather he take her home, he decided to try and convince her to stay.
He turned in the seat, slipped a hand to the nape of her neck, and pulled her toward him. Moving the last few inches to meet her halfway, he lowered his lips to hers.
Tasha didn’t protest, and when he stroked his tongue across her bottom lip, she opened her mouth willingly to him. Still, her body remained stiff, and he sensed her holding back.
So he took his time and kissed her slowly, languorously, enjoying the taste of the sauvignon that lingered on her lips. His mouth moved across hers, his tongue sliding, teasing, and he brought his hand forward to cup her cheek, stroking his thumb across her smooth skin. He lowered his other arm around her shoulder, holding her tightly, then pulled back a little so he could press light kisses across her lips from corner to corner, up her cheek, across her brows, back to her mouth.

“You look so beautiful tonight,” he murmured. “I want you so much.”
Her lips parted, and she exhaled softly, her breath warm and sweet. “Kole…”
He stopped her words by kissing her again, more passionately this time, letting his desire filter into the kiss, his tongue plunging into her mouth, his hand sliding back to hold her head. At this point, she finally relaxed. Her body softened against his and her arm rose around his neck, and pleasure surged through him, along with a surprising sense of relief.

He kissed her a while longer, then eventually lifted his head, not wanting to get so het up that he jumped on her as soon as they walked in the door. “Come on,” he murmured. “We have all evening to enjoy ourselves.”

She nodded. “Okay.”
They went in, and he did as he’d promised and poured them both a glass of wine, then extracted the chocolate bar from the fridge. Tasha turned on the TV, kicked off her shoes, and sank onto the sofa, and he joined her there, passing her a glass.

“What shall we watch?” He flicked through the channels. “Game of Thrones?” He knew she loved the series.

“Ooh, yes.”
So they sat back, and he put his arm around her, hugging her close to him as they watched the latest episode.

They talked about the plot and the characters as the episode unfolded, and he enjoyed the fantasy as much as he always did. But his mind still wandered, distracted by the smell of coconut rising from her hair, the occasional kiss she planted on his lips when she looked up at him, and the softness of her breasts just inches from his fingers where they rested on her ribcage.

He liked this. Sitting on the sofa, one of his best friends in the whole world curled up at his side, with the promise of a sensual night to follow. He fed her bits of chocolate, and when she sucked at his fingers, his concentration wandered even more.
He had purposely avoided bringing any girls back to his place as he hadn’t wanted the intrusion on his private territory, but it felt different with Tasha. She was so easy to be with, and fun too—she reacted well to his teasing manner and usually returned with a joke of her own, and he didn’t have to watch what he said. He felt comfortable. Content.

_Hmm._

The show ended, and although it was only nine thirty, Kole couldn’t wait any longer. He took their glasses into the kitchen, locked the front door, then led her into the bedroom. They went into the bathroom and brushed their teeth together, and he left her to cleanse her face and finish up, and then they stood in front of the bed by the large glass doors, bathed in the light of the full moon.

Kole took his time undressing her. First, he removed her glasses, folded them, and placed them on the bedside table. Then he released the clasp holding up her hair, watching the long brown strands unfurling like silver ferns to tumble across her shoulders.

He grasped her orange T-shirt by the base and pulled it up and over her head, laying it neatly on the chair, as she would have to wear it the next morning on her way to get changed before going to work. Then he unclipped the back of her bra and slid it down her arms. The moonlight shone on her round, high breasts, painting them white. He covered them with his palms for a moment, feeling their weight, and gave her a small kiss on the lips, but he didn’t lower his mouth to her nipples, not yet. He wanted her naked first.

Next, he unzipped the button at the top of her jeans, undid the zipper, and slid them down her legs. He dropped to his haunches, and she held onto his shoulders as he helped her step out of them.

Finally, he slid her panties down and helped her step out of those, too. Then he pitched forward onto his knees and pressed his nose to the triangle of hair, inhaling her scent. She smelled warm and musky, all woman, and he grew hard inside his jeans, his mouth watering. Unable to hold back, wanting to taste her, he rested his hands on the firm cheeks of her bottom and slid his tongue into her slick folds, groaning as she dominated his senses, taste, touch, smell. Her hands tightened into fists on his shoulders, and she gasped, her body bowing as she tipped back her head.

Kole held himself back with difficulty. He could easily have brought her to climax there and then, or pushed her onto the bed and slid straight inside her. But this time, he wanted it to
last. She was like an expensive box of chocolates, and he wanted to take time to savor every
mouthful, to treasure every moment of his time with her.

He pushed himself up, and this time let her pull his T-shirt over his head and drop it onto
the chair. Her hands fanned out over his chest, fingers running across his muscles, nails scraping
lightly over his nipples and down to his stomach.

She undid his jeans and he kicked them off, and then her fingers slid into the elastic of his
boxers. They skirted around his waist to his hips, then back again, and her thumb bumped the
errection that jutted out eagerly toward her. She glanced up at him, laughing, and he pushed her
away and removed the boxers. He didn’t want her taking him in hand this time, or dropping to
her knees. This time was for her.

He led her to the bed, peeled back the duvet, and they climbed onto the mattress and lay
down.

Kole left the duvet at the bottom of the bed. He propped his head on a hand, and she did
the same, facing him.

“What now?” she whispered playfully.

“I just want to look at you.” He spoke the truth. He wanted to commit this image to
memory, of her stretched out in his bed, her curvy body bathed in pearly moonlight. It
highlighted the swell of her breasts and stomach, her slim thighs, her shapely calves. It brought
out the apples of her cheeks and emphasized the hollows beneath her cheekbones.

“Something tells me you want to do more than just look.” Her hand moved to his erection,
which strained toward her, desperate to be touched. She closed her fingers around it, then
stroked, gentle and slow.

“Don’t,” he said, breathing heavily.

She stopped and ran a thumb over the swollen tip, catching the moisture that beaded there,
and brought it up to her mouth. Carefully, she sucked it off her thumb. “Why?” she whispered.

“Don’t you like it?”

Kole hesitated. She went so easily from the shy and doubtful girl who brought out his
instinct to protect, to the confident and sexy kitten that turned him on, and for a moment he
couldn’t decide which was the real Tasha. The emotions he preferred to keep restrained behind a
wall of steel were seeping through, mixing, causing confusion like mist on a battlefield.
Was her jealousy over Caitlin, the reticence, all an act, part of the bet? *Maybe I’ll win you over so much*, she’d told him on the beach, *you’ll give me the shop without a second thought.* He’d scoffed at the idea, but women were often much more skilful at applying their wiles than men. She been quite clear that men weren’t the only ones who could have a fling without getting their emotions involved. He’d wanted this to be about sex, but his hesitation told him there was more to it than that for him.

Was this just a play for his heart?
Chapter Twenty-Two

Tasha saw Kole hesitate and glimpsed puzzlement in his eyes before he lowered his lids. What had she done wrong? It had been a lovely evening so far, cuddled up together on the sofa, talking about this and that as they watched the TV. He’d kissed her occasionally and murmured about looking forward to going to bed with her, and then when they came into the bedroom, he’d enjoyed undressing her slowly before leading her to the bed. And his body was obviously interested in going further.

It was the bet. The pachyderm in the bedroom between them, blocking out the light.

They’d declared they were going to try and seduce each other, but the stupid wager had backfired big time. Because now they were both developing feelings, and yet neither felt they could mention it due to the tiny niggle of doubt that the other was doing it on purpose.

What should she do? Start talking about the bet, say it hadn’t been at all what she’d expected? State she really liked him? Get it all out in the open?

But what result could she expect from that? Would he laugh with relief and declare his undying love for her? Of course he wouldn’t. This was Kole, after all. There was a slim chance he would smirk and announce he’d won, and she didn’t know if she was brave enough to test that. And even if she could get him to admit he liked her more than he expected, that didn’t mean he’d want to take this further. Mr. Anti-Commitment wasn’t interested in relationships—he’d made that quite clear.

His hand rested on the bed between them, and she put hers on top. He turned his over, palm up, and rubbed his thumb across her knuckles.

There was nothing to be said. Talking was pointless, because they’d only stumble over the obstacle course of feelings and expectations and fears. Instead, she would have to show him how she felt.

She shifted on the mattress to move closer to him, until they were only a few inches apart. Raising a hand, she touched his cheek, stroking the bristles there and thinking how manly he was, how different to her. His large frame, muscular arms, tanned skin, all brought out his masculinity, and she slid her hand into his short hair and pulled his head down to hers, wanting to taste him, to drink him in, to possess and be possessed.
Opening her mouth to his searching tongue, she moaned as he kissed her deeply. He was such a great kisser. Previous boyfriends had just fastened their mouths on her and plunged their tongues in as if trying to lick out a bowl of chocolate ice cream. But Kole kissed sensually, moving his lips from one corner of her mouth to the other, teeth grazing, tongue sliding against hers in an erotic dance until she could feel moisture between her thighs and an ache in her abdomen.

She explored his body leisurely, running her hand up his arm and across his wide shoulders, then down to trace the muscles on his chest. Her fingers skimmed across his flat nipples and through the scattering of hair on his ribs, then moved lower, enjoying his taut body, so different to her own somewhat soft one. She did go to the gym occasionally, but she could hardly call herself muscular.

Not that Kole seemed to mind her being soft. His touch was languid and gentle, skimming down from her shoulder to her arm, then onto her hip and along the length of her thigh. His fingers were like feathers, so light, and they sent everything tingling, hairs rising across her body. He stroked up her thighs, brushed the triangle of hair at the top, then continued over the slight swell of her stomach and up to her breasts.

Tasha sighed as his fingers circled her nipples, teasing and not quite touching. It was warm in the room as he hadn’t yet put the ceiling fan on, and her nipples were relaxed and smooth. He closed his forefinger and thumb around one, stroking to the tip, and then squeezed tighter, a soft tug. Desire spiked through her system as if he’d injected her with a syringe full of lust, and she inhaled sharply, lips parting.

Their eyes met. Tasha’s heart raced. She loved the way passion darkened his eyes, his pupils dilating until his eyes appeared black in the moonlight.

“Come here,” he said.

She moistened her lips, naughtiness surging through her. “Make me.”

In answer, Kole picked up a thick strand of her hair and wrapped it around his fingers. Tighter and tighter he wound, until she was forced to lean forward, her mouth an inch away from his.

She closed her eyes, turning to mush inside, everything super-sensitive, desperate for him to kiss her. His hand tightened further, almost hurting, and her lips parted with an “Aaah…”
“You’re mine,” he stated. Her eyes flew open at the possessiveness in his voice. “And I’m yours,” he continued fiercely. “A hundred percent while we’re together. Remember?”

“I remember,” she whispered, heart thundering.

He clenched his fingers in her hair, almost brutal, his jaw set. “You drive me crazy, you know that?”

“And you me.”

His eyes blazed. “Don’t lie to me.”

“I’m not lying.” She took his hand from her hair and moved it between her thighs, covered his fingers with her own, and slid them down to her slick, swollen center. “Is that lying?”

His fingers stroked her automatically, but his chest continued to heave with emotion—what emotion, though, she wasn’t sure.

“I don’t want you faking anything, physical or emotional,” he snapped. “You hear me?”

Tasha gulped down a surge of emotion. “I’m not. I swear it, Kole.” She hooked her leg over his hips and shifted on the mattress until the tip of his erection slid just into her.

“Wait.” His hand dropped and clenched her hip, holding her in place. “Condom.”

She hesitated. “A doctor put me on the pill years ago for medical reasons. It’s up to you, but you don’t have to wear one if you don’t want to.”

He stared at her. “I’ve never had sex without one.”

“Me neither.”

She could feel him pressing into her, and had to fight not to push her hips down. This had to be his decision.

His expression cleared, and she couldn’t tell what he was thinking. He didn’t move, and she imagined his thoughts whirring away behind his eyes like cogs inside a glass clock.

She’d panicked him. Wishing she hadn’t said anything, she opened her mouth to tell him not to worry and to grab a condom from the drawer. But even as her lips parted, his hand tightened on her hip, and he pushed forward.

He slid easily into her, and they both exclaimed at the sensation of him deep inside her, hot, thick, and hard.

Kole closed his eyes. “Fuck.”

She stretched out against him, loving the feel of his skin against her from her breasts all the way down to where they were joined. “You feel amazing.”
He opened his eyes. The anger and resentment had vanished, and had been replaced by white hot desire. “You’re so fucking wet,” he said.

“Kole!”

“It’s not a complaint.” He gave a long, slow thrust. “Not a complaint at all.”

She groaned at the feel of him sliding through her flesh, the large head of his erection teasing her opening. “Oh…come on, don’t torture me…”

He chuckled and lowered his lips, teeth nibbling her bottom lip, tongue playing with hers. “It’s not always fun to be fast,” he murmured. “Sometimes it’s nice to take it slow.”

“Mmm.” As much as part of her longed for him to tip her onto her back and thrust away, there was something delightfully sensual about this. “I thought there was only one way to have sex,” she whispered, tipping back her head when his lips traced down her neck.

“There are a thousand ways.” His lips found her pulse point, and he sucked. Her body tightened in response, and he groaned as she clamped around him. “I’d love to show you them all.”

She closed her eyes. “Oh…”

He moved his hand up to her breast, rubbing his thumb across her nipple as he kissed her. “There are so many things I’d like to do your body.”

“Tell me some of them.” She was so turned on, she wouldn’t be able to last much longer. “I’d like to fuck you in every position I can think of.” His lips brushed hers, sending a shiver skittering through her.

“Like?”

“Me behind. You on all fours.”

She groaned. “My favorite.”

He chuckled. “Or standing in the shower.”

The thought of screwing under the stream of water, hot and wet and slippery, made her clench deep inside, sending more moisture to lubricate his thrusts.

“Jesus.” He dropped his hand to her butt and slid it down between her cheeks to feel the point where they met. He kissed her. “I’d like to do this with something other than my cock.”

Her eyes widened. “What do you mean?”

“A vibrator.”

Her jaw dropped. “Really?”
He laughed. “You don’t have one?”
“Of course I don’t have one! Where would I get one from?”
“There are catalogues, the odd shop in the city…” He kissed beneath her ear and nibbled her lobe.
She felt the slide of him in her sensitive flesh and imagined it being something other than his warm length. “What would it feel like?”
“Like me, but harder. Cooler. And it would buzz. I’ve heard it’s very pleasant.” He slid his hand between them, down through the triangle of hair, to stroke the small bundle of nerves at the top. “We could use it here. Imagine it vibrating, sending rippling all through you.”
Closing her eyes, she reached up to kiss him. Her orgasm was so close, everything tightening, tingling. “Please…”
“Then I’d move it inside you, and fuck you with it.”
She groaned. “Oh…”
His fingers slid down, collecting her slippery moisture. “And then…” He moved his hand over her hip to her tailbone, down between her cheeks. His lips brushed hers as his forefinger touched the puckered skin there. “I might tease you, right here.”
She held her breath as he slipped the tip of his finger into her tight hole. “Holy fuck.”
“Yes.” He kissed her hard and thrust more firmly, continuing to slide his fingertip just inside her. “I want to possess all of you, Tash. Every single inch of your body.”
Everything was tightening at the exciting, unusual sensation of being touched there.
“Kole…”
“Everything a man can do to a woman, I want to do to you.” His voice was fierce, possessive, brooking no argument.
She panted, about to explode. “Oh God…”
“More?” he murmured, his other hand moving behind her to hold the nape of her neck as if worried she’d pull away.
She squeezed her eyes closed, locked in sensation. “Yes…”
He slid his finger in farther, and she cried out, her body clamping around him of its own accord. The orgasm was fast and fierce, and she was only partly conscious of Kole thrusting hard, his muscles turning to concrete beneath her fingers as his own climax swept over him.
He thrust, she clenched, and they rode out the wave, the pleasure almost too much for her to bear, intense, white-hot.

When they’d finished, it took a moment for their bodies to release their tight grip on one another, and she gave a deep, satisfied groan as he finally removed his finger and let her relax. “Oh.” Her heart raced as if she’d drunk a hundred cups of coffee. He slid out of her, and she fell back onto the mattress, exhausted. “Jeez, Kole.”

He lay beside her on his back, breathing heavily. “Fuck.”

“Fuck indeed.”

He blew out a long breath, staring up at the ceiling. Then he turned his head to look at her. “You okay?”

She nodded. “I’m fucking amazing.”

He had the energy for a brief laugh. “I didn’t hurt you?”

“No, of course not.” She rolled onto her side to look at him. “Although it’s possible you may have pulled my hair out by the roots.”

“Should have done as you were told, then.” His lips curved.

“Point taken.” She reached across him to the box of tissues on the bedside table and plucked out a few. Then, giving him an amused look, she quickly cleaned herself up.

“Never had to worry about a damp patch before,” he said, watching her.

“No. Me neither.” She threw the tissues in the little rubbish basket and curled up next to him again. “It was nice, though. A different sensation, eh?”

“Very.” His expression went guarded again. What was he thinking?

She was too tired to puzzle it out for long. Reaching to the edge of the bed, she pulled the duvet back over them and snuggled up to his chest. He didn’t say anything, but he did lower his arms around her and hold her tightly, and that was enough, for now.
Kole slept soundly through until six thirty a.m., for once not waking in the night. He opened his eyes to warm sunlight, checked the clock, then touched the other side of the bed, searching for Tasha.

When his hand found only empty space, he lifted his head and looked around. He spotted her immediately, out on the deck looking over the harbor, moving through a series of yoga positions he seemed to recall was some kind of sun salutation. She wore her orange T-shirt, but her legs were bare.

Slowly, so as not to draw attention to himself, he lay back, propping his head on the pillows so he could watch her. She stood on a towel, facing the water with the boats already moving through the still waters, and stretched her hands up to the sky. Then she bent forward at the waist to let her hands brush the deck, giving him a nice view of her tight butt in her white panties. Dropping forward onto her hands, she held a kind of press-up position, then lowered herself to the floor before lifting her head up and arching her back. Finally, she lifted up into an inverted V, then pushed herself up to a standing position to start the cycle over again.

Even though she wasn’t that tall, she was beautifully elegant, moving gracefully through the *asanas* without a hint of effort. Kole was content to watch her, finding a strange pleasure in her routine, like watching a ballerina at a dance recital.

He thought he might have felt resentful at having someone else intruding on his private space, but in truth it was lovely having her around. She was like one of the crystals Maisey hung in her windows—she cast a light over his world, bringing a sparkle to it he hadn’t realized was missing.

He thought about that, as he lay there and watched her, the sun falling across the bed like gold leaf. The slightly open door let in the fresh morning air, bringing with it the pleasant smell of jasmine from the garden and the notion that the day was going to be bright and hot.

Had he ever felt this content, this happy, before?

After about another five minutes, Tasha gave her limbs a shake and bent to pick up the towel, then turned to come inside. Her eyebrows rose when she saw him awake, and a smile broke out on her face, as beautiful as the morning sun.

“Morning, sailor.” She came in and stretched out beside him on the bed. “Sleep well?”
He rolled onto his side to look at her. “I did. I think it must have been all the exercise.”
She chuckled and closed her eyes, lying with her arms by her side, palms facing upward. “I just need to cool down.”
“Okay. Can I watch?”
She opened one eye. “I’m just going to lie here.”
“Even so.”
She grinned and closed the eye again, took a deep breath, and let it out slowly.
Kole lay quietly and caressed her with his gaze as she relaxed. He watched her breasts rise and fall with her breathing, observed her pulse rate slow at the base of her neck, let his gaze caress the point at the top of her thighs where her white panties stretched across her hips and dipped between her legs.
“Are you letching at me?”
His dragged his gaze back to her face. Her eyes were still closed, but her lips had curved.
“Yes.”
Her lips curved a little more. “Thought so.”
“Tash?”
“Yes…”
“What are you doing over the next few days?”
“Come and stay with me.”
Her eyes opened then, and she stared. “What?”
“Stay with me. Pick up what you need from your house later and stay here for a few nights.”
She studied him, her expression startled and thoughtful. “Seriously?”
“Seriously. We might as well make the most of the time we have.”
“You’re not too busy?”
“Well, Saturday I have a wedding all day, but you’re welcome to come along as my assistant.” He smiled.
Her expression softened. “Okay.”
He was surprised at how much his heart lifted. “I’m glad.”
They looked at each other for a moment.
Then she reached over, lifted the duvet, and glanced down. Her smile turned mischievous as her eyes met his again.

“Morning glory,” he said helplessly. “What can you do?”

Laughing, she pulled him into her arms and planted her lips on his. “I have time for a quickie,” she stated, “before I go home and get ready for work. If you’re up for it?”

“Fuck, yeah.”

So they made love, enthusiastic and fervent, Tasha climbing on top without being asked and riding him to victory. And Kole lay back and let her, enjoying the view of her against the rising sun, the pure delight of early-morning loving.

She left shortly after that to shower and change back at her place, but promised to return after work with a few items to carry her through to Sunday. Kole kissed her goodbye, wrapping his arms around her, reluctant to let her go. But eventually, she laughed and pulled away, and drove off, leaving him feeling oddly bereft.

He shook his head and went back inside. She was coming back that evening! And he had lots to do that day.

First, he had an appointment with a woman in her fifties who wanted a glamorous photograph to give her husband for their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. While he waited to sign the lease on the new place, Kole was working in a sleep-out belonging to his cousin, Annie. In her late thirties, slender and with a mass of brown curly hair, Annie was a mother of three, down-to-earth, and practical. The light, spacious sleep-out doubled nicely as a studio. It had a large living room he’d lined with white sheets in which to take photos, a separate bedroom for visitors to get changed in, should they need to, and a bathroom. Annie also made them coffee, which was an added bonus.

Kole set up his camera and waited for the customer, Bridget, to arrive. She was ten minutes late, and when Annie showed her into the studio, he could see what had caused the delay by her rapid breathing and the way she twisted her hands.

She’d told him she wanted something sexy and suggestive, but she’d obviously had a sudden attack of nerves at the thought of undressing in front of him.

Kole chatted to her for a while to relax her, surprised at her hesitation when she’d seemed so confident over the phone. Annie, who’d obviously spotted the problem, brought them coffee
and joined them, perching on the arm of his chair. He glanced at her, giving her a slight shrug when Bridget stared into her cup. What should he do?

Annie leaned forward and rested a hand on Bridget’s arm. “You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to,” she soothed. “You’ll look just as amazing in the dress you’re wearing, I promise. Kole’s brilliant at capturing his customers at their best.”

But Bridget shook her head, her face earnest. “I really want to do this for my husband. He’s always said he’d love a sexy photo of me, and I can hardly ask my brother-in-law to take it! It’s just…” She stared at her hands. “The more I think about it, the more embarrassed I feel.”

“No need,” Annie said. “You’re still beautiful. You have great skin, a curvy figure, and a real glow about you. That’s what he’ll see when he looks at the photograph. I promise.” She stood and gathered a couple of swatches of cloth she’d found in her cupboard, and held them up against Bridget’s face. “The scarlet, I think, Kole. It really brings out Bridget’s silver hair, and you can do that clever thing you do with the computer and give it a silver background for their wedding anniversary.”

Annie turned to him then. “Can you take the cups back to the kitchen? I’ll help Bridget get set up.”

Wondering what she was up to, he took the cups to the kitchen, played with her pet Labrador, Brandon, for a few minutes, then went back to the sleep-out.

Annie had finally encouraged Bridget to undress and lie on the chaise lounge Kole had found at a garage sale one rainy afternoon. She’d then draped the scarlet cloth over the now giggling Bridget, arranging it carefully to cover the important areas but to reveal as much skin as possible.

“Wonderful,” Kole said with admiration. Annie had also obviously helped Bridget with her hair and makeup, and Bridget wore a scarlet lipstick that went perfectly with the cloth and brought out the silver in her hair.
He walked over to her and dropped to his haunches beside her. “May I?”

She nodded shyly.

With his photographer’s eye, he tugged the cloth here and there to ensure it fell in attractive folds that concealed the areas she’d be worried about, while highlighting her good points.

When he was satisfied, he started taking photos. He talked to her while he did so, making her laugh and capturing her pretty smile, checking the pictures on the screen and adjusting the next until he had what he wanted.

Eventually, he was content with the batch of photos he’d taken, and he left the room so Bridget could get dressed, taking a walk in the garden while he waited. The large pohutukawa trees were filled with their Christmassy red flowers as if they’d bloomed to complement Bridget’s photographs. It reminded him midsummer was only a few days away. Then, this thing he had going with Tasha would be over.

He wasn’t sure how he felt about that.

Bridget and Annie came out of the sleep-out, and Bridget walked over to him, and to his surprise, gave him a big hug. “Thank you so much.”

He laughed and hugged her back. “Wait until you see the photos! I hope you like them. I’ll work on them today and email you the first copies over the next day or so.”

“Lovely, thank you, Kole.” Bridget hugged Annie too, and left.

Annie exchanged a look with him, and they both blew out a relieved breath.

“Thanks for your help,” Kole said. “I really appreciate it. You’re so great with people.”

She waved a hand in dismissal. “I could see where she was coming from, that’s all. After years of marriage you don’t always realize how you’ve changed, and exposing all your flabby bits and wrinkles can be a bit daunting!”

He grinned. “I can’t imagine being married one year, let alone twenty-five.”

“Oh, you will.” Annie smiled. “A girl will come along and you won’t want to let her go.”

He frowned. “I don’t know. You wouldn’t commit yourself to one job for the rest of your life, or one house, or one anything, in fact. Don’t they say ‘variety is the spice of life’? How could you be so sure you’re not going to get bored with one person?”

“You can’t, I suppose. Hence the high divorce rate.” She sounded amused.
“But you can’t go into marriage thinking ‘oh well, if it doesn’t work out, I’ll just get divorced.’ Don’t the vows say ‘until death parts us’?”

Annie chuckled. “You’re an old romantic at heart, aren’t you?”

He scratched the back of his neck. He wouldn’t normally have spoken to anyone about something like this, but he’d known Annie since he was a baby, and they’d always been quite close. “I just don’t understand how you can promise to love someone forever. It’s a huge ask.”

Annie shaded her eyes against the bright December sun and looked up at the fantails flitting between the branches. “You don’t think like that. What happens is that you meet someone, and you might not even know at the beginning that this is The One. But you date, and you keep dating, and at some point you discover you can’t bear to be apart. And when you are apart, you want your ring on their finger, to show everyone they belong to you.”

A shiver passed down Kole’s spine. He hadn’t considered what the exchanging of the ring symbolized. He’d always seen it as a constant reminder of the fact a married person was supposed to be monogamous, a warning against straying from the marriage bed, like a girl sitting a guy down and forcing him to watch Fatal Attraction. But the notion of putting a ring on a girl’s finger to tell everyone else she belonged to him… How delightfully possessive that sounded.

Mine.

“Who is she?”

He blinked in the sunlight and saw Annie smiling at him. “What?”

“Who’s on your mind?”

He opened his mouth to deny it, but her arched eyebrows stopped his words. He sighed. “I’m seeing Tasha.”

“Tasha Wilde?” Her eyebrows disappeared into her curly fringe.

“It’s just a temporary thing. A fling. It’s not serious.”

Annie nodded, but her lips curved.

“It’s not,” he protested. But again, the word rang in his head. Mine. At least… He ran a hand through his hair. “I didn’t expect to feel like this. She plays on my mind more than any other girl I’ve been with.”

“She’s nice. She’ll keep you in line, too.”

He gave her a wry look. “I don’t know I want to take it further though. I’m…” He wasn’t sure what word to use.
“Scared?” Annie suggested.
“Maybe. Life’s so short, Annie. I don’t want to make a mistake.”
She reached out and squeezed his arm. “I understand. But sometimes you have to take that leap of faith. *Carpe diem.*”
He didn’t want to think about it anymore. “Thanks for today, anyway. You were really helpful.”
“Oh, my pleasure. It’s been lovely having you here, actually. I’ve enjoyed it.”
He decided to take the plunge and voice the idea that had been playing in his head for a while. “I don’t suppose you’re interested in a job?” Her youngest had just started school, and although she worked the odd day in a local shop, she didn’t have a job to go back to, as far as he was aware.
She looked startled. “Oh. Doing what?”
“Well, working me for. As a kind of assistant. You could start part time and see how it goes. Fit in around the family. I could do with someone to answer the phone, schedule appointments. Keep records. Make me coffee.” He grinned.
A warm smile spread over her face. “Cheeky.”
“Seriously, though, I might need on-site help occasionally too. After taking those sports photos at the school, they’ve talked about hiring me to take all the school photographs, as the firm they’ve been using has let them down a few times. That would be a huge contract, and I’d need some help.”
“It sounds wonderful. I’d love to. Hey, any news on the new studio?”
He cleared his throat. “I’m working on it.”
“In a way, it’ll be a shame to move. It’s been nice having you here, and it would be perfect for me.”
“I suppose. It’s been great—I appreciate you letting me work from here.” He checked his watch. “Anyway, I have another appointment in a couple of hours so it’ll give me time to work on those photos for a bit.”
“Coffee?” Annie asked.
“Please.”
She smiled and went off to the kitchen.
Kole watched the fantail on the tree in front of him dancing about on the branch. For some reason, it made him think of Tasha doing her yoga that morning, graceful and lithe, beautiful against the rising sun.

*Carpe diem, Kole.*

Thoughtful, he turned and went back into the studio.
Chapter Twenty-Four

Tasha spent a busy morning at the café, making coffees, baking bread, and talking to Maisey about the setting up of Treats in between serving customers. Providing all went well, they were planning to decorate over the Christmas period and then have a grand opening in the New Year.

“So how’s the seduction going?” Maisey wiped down the counter and leaned against it, folding her arms. “Do you think Joss and I will end up voting in your favor?”

Tasha concentrated on arranging the loaves on the shelf. “Definitely. He’s practically eating out of my hand.” She glanced across at her best friend, who had raised an eyebrow.

“Yeah, that sounds like my brother.”

Tasha remembered the way his face had lit up when she’d agreed to stay with him for a few nights. Perhaps he was more into her than Maisey anticipated? Or was that wishful thinking? He’d certainly not said anything about wanting to continue the relationship after the weekend.

“He has asked me to stay over for a couple of days,” she admitted.

Maisey’s eyes widened. “Really?”

“Yeah.”

The two girls stared at each other for a moment. Then Maisey turned away. She retrieved some more paper bags for the pie cabinet and tucked them into the slot. “It’s going to be interesting on Sunday. Joss has booked a table at Aqua Blue for one o’clock, and we’ll announce the winner there.”

“Great.” As soon as she said it, Tasha knew her voice had betrayed her lack of enthusiasm. Maisey obviously caught it too, because she turned, a look of surprise on her face.

The two girls studied each other for a moment.

“Oh no,” Maisey said.

Tasha waved a hand. “Don’t get ideas.”

“You’ve gone and done it.” Maisey sat heavily on the nearest chair. “You’ve fallen for him.”

“No! No. Okay, a little bit, but it’s not a problem. It was bound to happen. He’s fallen for me a little bit too. It would be odd if that hadn’t happened. We are sleeping together, after all.”
Maisey gave her a worried look. “Sweetie, I know I said he’s not as cold as he makes out, and I do think he likes you. He wouldn’t ask you to stay over if he didn’t. But even so, you know he won’t be interested in a relationship, don’t you?”

“I know,” Tasha said, her mouth going dry.

“Don’t kid yourself he will be, because he won’t.”

“I know.” She cleared her throat and checked her watch; luckily, it was her lunch break. “I have to go home. I need to pick up a few things for tonight.”

“Sure.” Maisey stood and opened her mouth as if to say something, but Tasha waved a hand and headed for the door, and Maisey didn’t get to voice the words.

Tasha walked quickly to her car, got in, and headed for home. She wasn’t going to cry over Kole Graham. She’d gone into this fling with her eyes fully open, and even though she’d fallen for him harder than she’d planned, it would make no difference to the final outcome.

But as she drove, she kept thinking about that morning, about the words he’d uttered as they’d made love. You’re mine... And I’m yours... He’d said them so passionately. She’d been convinced he was starting to feel something for her. Did she stand a chance of talking Mr. Non-Commitment into having a real relationship?

Pondering on it, she took a detour down to the harbor, intending to call in to see Fox and order a special takeaway of something nice for dinner that evening. As she turned the corner, however, and slowed the car, her gaze fell on a solitary figure standing on the harbor side, his back to the water, looking at the row of buildings.

She pulled the car to the side of the road, her heart pounding. Kole stood staring at the shop a few doors down from Aqua Blue. He’d stuffed his hands in the pockets of his jeans, his shoulders were hunched, and he was obviously lost in thought. She was close enough to see the look of determination on his face.

Quickly, so as not to draw attention, she turned the car around and headed back up to her house.

Her hands tightened on the wheel. Stupid, she scolded herself, tears stinging her eyes. You stupid girl. He was obviously reminding himself of the reason for their fling.

Best she remember it, too.

*
The afternoon passed quickly, and by the end of the day, Tasha had gotten her head around the whole situation. Yes, she had great affection for Kole, and they were having a fantastic time. But it was just a bit of fun, and at the root of it, they were playing a game to get the shop. He’d crept ahead in the race over the last day or so, and it was time for her to pull out all the stops. The shop was what mattered—that was the overriding factor in this whole situation. The opening of Treats to Tempt You relied on her convincing Joss and Maisey that Kole had more feelings for her than she had for him. If they didn’t get the shop, they’d have to continue looking for another site, and because Tasha had an eye on the estate agents to make sure nothing came up in the meantime, she knew there wasn’t anything suitable out there at the moment.

Even though she’d sorted it all out in her mind, she still felt nervous when she finally drove to Kole’s house at five o’clock. He’d sent her a text to say he was already home, and as she pulled up, she took a few deep breaths.

This is all about fun, she told herself firmly, picturing him standing in the harbor, staring at the shop. That’s all he’s interested in. She pushed away the resentment that rose inside her and lifted her chin. She was a treat to tempt him. Seductive and sexy, Tasha Graham! Knock his socks off! Her thoughts continued to rattle around in her head like beans in a tin, though, until she knocked on the door, and he opened it.

His face broke out into a smile at the sight of her, and immediately everything flew out of her head except the pleasure she felt at being with him.

“Hey, you.” He stepped back to let her in. “Good day?”

“Better now.” She walked in, and after he’d closed the door, pinned him up against it and pressed her lips to his.

“Mmph.” Far from objecting, he gave a muffled agreement and bent to pick her up. She wrapped her legs around his waist, loving the way he tightened his arms around her, how he kissed her so hungrily, as if they’d been apart for a whole year instead of a day.

“I’ve missed you,” she said as he deposited her on the kitchen workbench and kissed around to her ear.

“And I you.” He touched his tongue to the sensitive spot below her lobe, then kissed down her neck. “I’m so glad you’re staying tonight.”

“Mmm. Me too.” She tipped back her head, adoring his enthusiasm. “I’ve been thinking about this all afternoon,” she said honestly. Once she’d fixed it in her mind this was all about sex
and nothing else, she’d spent hours daydreaming about the feel of him inside her, the weight of him on top.

He chuckled and grasped the hem of her T-shirt, and before she could protest, lifted it over her head. “Glad to hear it.” He paused and studied her as she gasped. “Sorry, do you want a drink first?”

That made her laugh. “No. Thank you.”

“Good.” He kissed her, delving his tongue into her mouth, and she moaned and did the same. His hands moved to the lacy cups of her bra, and she arched her back, pressing her breasts into his palms, inhaling as he rolled her nipples between his fingers. She unbuttoned his shirt and pushed it off his shoulders to the floor, then followed his happy trail down to his jeans. He was already hard, his erection evident even through the thick denim, and when she squeezed it, he groaned.

He lifted his head, and his pupils were dilated, making his eyes seem dark with passion. “Where do you want me?” He nibbled her bottom lip. “Your turn to choose.” His hands crept around her back and released her bra strap, and he whisked it off and dropped it on top of their T-shirts.

She closed her eyes, exhaling with an \textit{aaah} of pleasure as he tugged her nipples to hard peaks. “Mmm… I don’t mind… Surprise me.”

“Surprise you?” He bent his head and sucked a nipple into his mouth.

“Oh… Mmm… Teach me something different, Kole…”

He straightened and laughed, then picked her up again. “Expand your sexual education, you mean?”

“I do mean.” She kissed him, tightening her thighs around his waist in an attempt to assuage the ache between her legs.

He carried her through to the bedroom and lowered her to a standing position at the foot of the bed. Then he undid his jeans, and she did the same, and they took them off with their underwear until they were both standing naked.

Kole gave her a firm push, and she fell back onto the bed, laughing. Before she could rise, he dropped to his knees before her, pushed open her legs, and buried his mouth in the heart of her.
Tasha exclaimed loudly and clutched his hair with both hands. “Jeez, Kole!” But he didn’t slow down. He plunged his tongue inside her, then licked firmly right up the center before fastening his mouth on her clit.

She squirmed and writhed beneath him, and was just getting to the point of no return when he straightened.

“Oh…” she said, the breath leaving her lungs in a disappointed rush, but he just chuckled. “You wanted something different,” he said silkily. “I’m only obeying orders. Lift your knees.”

Heart racing, she pulled her knees toward her, wondering what he had in mind. The memory of what he’d done with his finger during their previous lovemaking session made her head spin. Surely not… She wasn’t sure if she was ready for that.

But he took her feet in his hands and lifted them, straightening her legs. “Cross your ankles,” he instructed. She did as she was told, glad the yoga kept her flexible, still puzzling as to what he was up to. Her heels rested against his chin, and the hair on his chest brushed the backs of her knees.

Holding her locked ankles with one hand, he stroked the back of her legs, then brushed one finger down her core and slipped it inside her. Tasha gasped, not realizing until then she was fully exposed to his hot gaze. Tipping his head, admiring the view, he pushed another finger inside her, curving them up and stroking the front wall of her vagina. She bit her bottom lip, a delicious sensation spreading through her as her muscles instinctively tightened, squeezing her sensitive flesh the way they couldn’t when her legs were open.

He continued to stroke her for a while, biting and nibbling her toes and ankles, his fingers mimicking the thrust of his erection until she throbbed with need and gave a long desperate moan, close to coming. In answer, he withdrew his fingers and sucked them, his hand glistening with her moisture.

“I’m only obeying orders. Lift your knees.”

Heart racing, she pulled her knees toward her, wondering what he had in mind. The memory of what he’d done with his finger during their previous lovemaking session made her head spin. Surely not… She wasn’t sure if she was ready for that.

But he took her feet in his hands and lifted them, straightening her legs. “Cross your ankles,” he instructed. She did as she was told, glad the yoga kept her flexible, still puzzling as to what he was up to. Her heels rested against his chin, and the hair on his chest brushed the backs of her knees.

Holding her locked ankles with one hand, he stroked the back of her legs, then brushed one finger down her core and slipped it inside her. Tasha gasped, not realizing until then she was fully exposed to his hot gaze. Tipping his head, admiring the view, he pushed another finger inside her, curving them up and stroking the front wall of her vagina. She bit her bottom lip, a delicious sensation spreading through her as her muscles instinctively tightened, squeezing her sensitive flesh the way they couldn’t when her legs were open.

He continued to stroke her for a while, biting and nibbling her toes and ankles, his fingers mimicking the thrust of his erection until she throbbed with need and gave a long desperate moan, close to coming. In answer, he withdrew his fingers and sucked them, his hand glistening with her moisture.

“Kole…” she said, panting, yearning for release.

He pushed his fingers into her again, then to her shock, reached forward and slid them into her mouth. She gave a muffled complaint, but the heat in his eyes halted her words, and she sucked, her tongue sliding over the pads of his fingers, tasting the musky arousal that coated them.
“See how fucking amazing you taste?” he said, doing it again, and again, until moisture coated her lips. His hard shaft pressed up against her swollen lips each time he leaned forward, sliding through her flesh, and eventually she groaned, desperate to have him inside her.

“Please…” she begged.

“What?” His hot gaze taunted her as he plunged his fingers into her again.

“Fuck me,” she said.

His erection twitched against her, and it was his turn to groan as he guided it toward her entrance. He stroked down her folds until they parted to admit him. Then he pressed the tip into her.

Tasha held her breath, the position surprising her. Could he enter her at that angle? Sure, his fingers hadn’t appeared to have trouble, but his erection was a lot bigger than they were. He touched his tongue to her toes as, very slowly, he pushed his hips forward.

She was so wet and swollen he had no trouble sliding inside her. Closing her eyes, she moaned as his long, hard length filled her until the thatch of hair at the base of his shaft brushed her bottom. She could feel him inside, and her muscles clamped around him, the position making her tighter than usual.

He stopped and held the pose, his tongue slipping through her toes, which was a hell of a lot more erotic than she’d thought it would be. His dark eyes found hers. “Nice?” he asked, the words almost a growl.

“Incredible,” she whispered.

“You’re the one who’s incredible.” His right hand slid up her ribcage to her breast, and he squeezed her soft nipple in his fingers. “You’re so tight like this, and you look fucking amazing.” He plucked the skin until it hardened in his fingers, then licked them before returning them to tease her. “I’m going to do as you commanded and fuck you now, okay?”

“Okay,” she said faintly.

“Get ready. I’m too fired up to go slow and gentle.”

There was no time to brace herself, though. He pulled back, and before she could say anything, rammed forward. She arched her back and moaned. He did it again, and again, setting a punishing pace, his hips meeting her thighs with a sharp smack every time he thrust.

Tasha cried out, stunned by the feeling of him opening her, stretching her every time he plunged forward. Unable, and unwilling, to stop him doing whatever he wanted, she raised her
arms above her head on the bed and gave herself over to him, letting him have her, letting him take his pleasure from her. And as he fucked her hard, so her own pleasure built, her tight thighs squeezing her swollen sensitive flesh until her orgasm bloomed. His tongue slipped through her toes while his fingers plucked her nipple, and she moaned as her central muscles slowly clenched, bringing with them a wave of bliss.

He continued to pound into her, drawing out her climax, and only as she gasped and clutched at the duvet did he finally give in. His hips jerked, his teeth bit into the soft flesh of her calf, and he shuddered, spilling deep inside her, until he had no more left to give.
Chapter Twenty-Five

Kole released Tasha’s ankles and lowered her legs around him to the ground. Still inside her, he leaned forward and gave her a long, lingering kiss.

“Wow.” Her wide eyes stared up at him. “That was just…wow.”

He chuckled and withdrew carefully, then, after pushing himself up to sit on the bed, he lay back beside her. “I agree.” He blew out a long breath.

She rolled over and extracted a few tissues from the box, cleaned herself up, then curled on her side to look at him. Her lips curved.

“What?” he said suspiciously.

“You’re quite a tiger in the bedroom.”

“Rawr.”

She grinned and kissed him. “I mean it. I guess it’s all the experience you’ve had.”

“Thanks. I think.”

Flopping onto her back, she lifted her legs again and crossed them at the ankle. “I liked it like that.”

“Me too.”

“It felt good for you?”

He laughed. “Yes, Tash. It felt good for me. Couldn’t you tell?”

“You seemed to enjoy it. But guys always enjoy sex. Don’t they?”

It was his turn to roll onto his side, and he lifted up onto an elbow to look at her. “We do. But it’s not always like that.”

Her lovely mahogany eyes stared into his. “Isn’t it?”

He smiled and shook his head. “No.” And he meant it. There were all kinds of sex. Fast sex, angry sex, luxurious sex, kinky sex, desperate sex. Even bad sex was better than none at all.

But the kind of sex he’d just had with Tasha… That was really, really good sex.

He kissed her nose. “Enough compliments for you or you won’t be able to get your head out of the door. Dinner?”

“God, yes. I’m starving.”

Laughing, they dressed, left the house, and walked down to the harbor, bought a takeaway from Fox’s restaurant and brought it back to the house. They poured themselves a glass of wine
and took it with their dinner onto the deck, and sat there for over an hour, talking about this and
that and enjoying the food. Tasha pleased Kole by eating hers out of the container it came in,
apparently as reluctant to wash dishes as he was.

The sun sank toward the horizon and the sandflies started snapping, so they went indoors,
poured another glass of wine, and sat to watch a movie. Tasha curled up by his side again, and he
rested his cheek on the top of her head, more content than he liked to admit to have her there.

Later, when the sun had set and the Milky Way arced across the black velvet sky, they
went to bed and make love again, slower this time, enjoying just touching each other, stroking,
gently arousing. And Kole was surprised when, halfway through the night, he roused to feel
Tasha’s lips on his neck, her breasts pressed against his back. She proceeded to kiss him the way
he’d kissed her a few nights before, teeth grazing, tongue lacing across his skin. He lay there for
a while, enjoying her attention, conscious it was the first time a woman had ever awoken him in
the night, wanting sex. Other girls had been happy to oblige if he’d made the move, some more
willingly than others, but none of them had ever wanted him so often. The thought warmed him
through.

Growing hard at her sensual murmurs, he shivered at the soft whisper that came in the
darkness.

“Roll onto your back.”
He did so, content to follow her lead.

“Move down a little,” she directed.

Wondering what she was up to, he slid down, then held his breath as she lifted up. Facing
the opposite way, she straddled his head before lowering herself down into a sixty-nine.

He rested his hands on her hips, the musky scent of her reaching his nostrils a moment
before her hair brushed his lips, At the same time, her mouth closed over the tip of his erection.
Groaning, he stroked his nose up her core, following with his tongue. She responded by sliding
her lips down his shaft, her tongue moving over the ridge of the tip as she sucked gently.

Engulfed as they were in darkness, he felt a slave to his senses, his whole attention focused
on two things—the heat of her mouth around him, and the taste of her on his tongue. Her arousal
soon coated his lips and chin, and he lapped it up greedily, stroking his tongue from her clit all
the way up, and loving the way she squirmed on top of him.
It didn’t take him long to come. Her tongue was too warm, her lips too enticing, and his fingers clenched her hips as his internal muscles contracted and pumped jet after jet into her willing mouth. Her throat muscles tightened as she swallowed, and then she pushed herself up a little, widening her thighs to give him better access and let him finish the job.

He did so happily, licking and sucking until her climax hit her. By the time she’d done and lifted herself off him to collapse back on the bed, her skin was slick and she was panting. She lay next to him, upside down, and he felt her hand join with his, their fingers linking in the darkness saying more somehow than words could ever have done.

*

Friday morning followed much the same as Thursday, filled with appointments at Annie’s sleep-out and a couple of hours at the computer finishing off Bridget’s photos, which he emailed to her mid-morning. He had to force himself to concentrate, though, his mind crowded with frequent thoughts of his and Tasha’s nighttime loving.

Just before one o’clock, he broke off and drove to Joss’s surgery, as they’d arranged to meet for lunch. He sat in the waiting room and flicked through a magazine while he waited ten minutes for Joss to come out, trying to banish Tasha from his mind. Had any other woman ever invaded his thoughts in such a manner?

“Sorry, sorry.”

The harassed voice brought Kole out of his daydreaming with a snap, and he laid down the magazine and stood up. “Hey.”

Joss’s hair stuck up at the front as if he’d repeatedly run his hands through it. “I know I’m late. It’s been crazy here this morning.”

“No worries. You okay to take a break?”

“Yeah, I need to get out.”

They walked down to the harbor, both donning sunglasses against the bright December sun, ordered a sandwich and a Coke from the bar on the waterfront, and sat at a table outside.

“Amazing weather.” Joss propped his feet on another chair. “I can’t believe it’s nearly Christmas.”

“I know. You done any shopping?”

“None whatsoever.”

“Me neither.”
They both laughed. “We’re useless without women,” Joss said, tipping his face up to the sun. “It would be worth getting married just to have someone to sort out the festive season.”

A waitress came out with their Cokes, and Kole took a long swallow, deciding not to reply to Joss’s comment. “What are you doing on Christmas Day?”

“Going to my parents,” Joss said. “They want to make a big family day for Hayley’s kids, as it’s their first Christmas without their father.” His sister’s husband had left her for another woman a few months before and apparently wanted to spend Christmas and New Year with his new toy. Kole knew Joss was furious with the guy, but there was little he could do about it except support his sister.

“How are your parents?” Kole asked. Joss’s mother, who suffered from M.S., was confined to a wheelchair, and his father was showing symptoms of Alzheimer’s. It wasn’t a good time for the busy doctor, who had enough on his plate with his demanding job, let alone his family.

“Up and down.” Joss leant back as the waitress brought out their sandwiches and gave her a smile, and then changed the subject. Clearly, he didn’t want to talk about his problems. “So, how are things going with Tash?”

Kole took a big bite of the chicken and tomato sandwich and chewed for a moment as he considered how to answer. Joss met his gaze, and they both started to laugh.

“All right,” Kole said, taking another swig of Coke.

“She hooked you yet?”

“She’s doing her best.” Nicely sidestepped, Kole.

Joss lowered his voice conspiratorially. “What’s she like? As feisty in bed as out?”

Kole took another bite of the sandwich. When they were younger, the two of them had often compared notes on girlfriends and sex—it was the only way they ever learned anything. But for the first time in his life, he felt reluctant to talk. This thing with Tasha might only be a fling, but even so, he didn’t want to divulge personal details about what they got up to when they were alone.

“Ah,” Joss said.

“Ah what?”

“I knew it. I fucking knew you’d fall for her.”

Kole glared at him. “I haven’t. I just don’t want to go into detail.”

Joss studied him, a thoughtful expression on his face. “But it’s not what you expected?”
Kole went to deny it, then sighed. Fuck the bet, he’d known Joss a long time. If he couldn’t speak to his best mate about this mess, who could he talk to?

He looked out at the harbor, at the nearest white boat rocking in the light summer breeze. Someone had tied tinsel around the mast, reminding him it was nearly Midsummer’s Eve. Only two more nights to go. Would he be upset or relieved when it was all over?

“Yes and no,” he said. “I knew it would be fun, and it is. But I underestimated the effect our friendship would have. Usually, when I get together with a girl, I don’t know her well, and it takes a while for intimacy to grow.”

“At which point you run a mile.”

Kole’s lips twisted. “Yeah. But we’ve all known each other since we were teenagers. She knew me before I went to uni, before Harry died. It’s like she’s Dorothy, peering behind the curtain.”

“Does it make you uncomfortable?”

“Yes. I hadn’t thought of it before, but it does. I like Tash. She’s great fun, and we’ve got on great. But it makes me uneasy that she knows me so well.” He twisted the ring he wore on his right hand. “I decided after Harry died I wanted to live life to the full. I didn’t want to commit myself to one person and feel I had to stay with them out of some misguided loyalty that would just end up making us both miserable. And so, if things look like they’re getting serious with a girl, I just back off before it develops into anything more.”

“Before she gets to know you,” Joss commented.

“I guess so, yeah.”

“But Tasha already has a head start.”

Kole ate another bite of sandwich, and didn’t reply. They sat for a while, watching the gannets diving into the water and emerging with fish in their beaks.

“What are you going to do?” Joss asked eventually. “Do you want to take this further?”

“I don’t know. Five years ago, I thought I’d never settle down. It…” He went to say “scares me,” but closed his mouth so the words didn’t fall out.

“Yeah,” Joss said, as if he’d said them anyway. “I know.”

They watched a family who were obviously on holiday looking in the shop windows. The parents held hands while a small girl and an even smaller boy ran in front of them. When the boy
tripped and fell, letting out a squawk of pain, the father ran forward to pick him up and cuddled him until he stopped crying.

The two men eating their sandwiches exchanged a glance.

“You want kids?” Kole asked. It wasn’t a subject they’d ever talked about before.

Joss frowned. “Not yet. Maybe when I’m in my thirties. I don’t have room for anything in my life at the moment except work, Hayley, and my parents.”

Kole knew Joss had lived in Auckland with a woman called Ana for a while. He’d met her in South America, where he’d worked for a few years, and she’d come back to live in New Zealand with him. Kole had met her once, when he’d gone down to the city on business. She’d seemed nice, somewhat intense, and she’d been all over Joss. But only a month later they’d broken up, and Joss had returned to Mangonui, silent, serious, and apparently determined to stay single.

Joss glanced at him. “You?”

Kole looked back at the tinsel-bedecked boat. “I’d have given a resounding no if you’d asked me six months ago. But Harry’s five-year anniversary last month, and now this thing with Tash…” He gave a frustrated sigh. “I don’t know. I feel…odd.”

“Restless?”

“No, not really. The opposite, oddly. Settled. I thought coming back here might make me frustrated and claustrophobic, but instead I feel comfortable. Content. I’ve travelled, lived here, there, and everywhere, been with plenty of women, and now…” He didn’t know what he was trying to say, so he tailed off.

“Are we getting old?” Joss asked,

He gave a short laugh. “Maybe.”

Joss finished off his Coke. “I’d better get back.”

Kole stuffed the last of his sandwich in his mouth, and they began the walk up to Joss’s surgery.

On the way, they talked about how the Black Caps were doing against the Aussies in the cricket, but Kole’s stomach churned uneasily as his mind played over their conversation. He liked Tasha. They’d had great fun. But how did a person know when a relationship was strong enough to develop into something more? They could stay together and give it a try. But what if
things fell apart? Then he’d lose her as a friend, and possibly also get his heart broken in the process. He’d tried to avoid that for years. Was he brave enough to go for it now?
“No,” Tasha said for the umpteenth time. “Absolutely not.”

“Jolly good,” Laura Wilde replied as if she hadn’t answered. She handed the pretty pink top to the sales assistant. “We’ll take it.”

Tasha gritted her teeth and pulled her mother to one side of the shop. “Will you stop bossing me about?” she said furiously. “I’m twenty-four and perfectly able to buy my own clothes.”

“And yet you don’t have a single thing in your wardrobe suitable for a wedding.”

“I do so!”

“You can’t wear jeans,” Laura snapped.

“Mother, I’m helping Kole with the photography, I’m not the fucking bride.”

Laura narrowed her eyes. “First, mind your language, and second, it doesn’t matter. It’s a wedding, and you have to look pretty for your boyfriend.”

Now Tasha was really getting angry. “He’s not my boyfriend, and I refuse to change the way I dress for a man!”

Other customers were starting to glance over at their raised voices. Laura grabbed her daughter’s wrist and dragged her into a quieter corner of the shop.

Tasha yanked her arm away, close to tears. “Let go.”

Laura stood in front of her, blocking her way out. “Will you grow up, for God’s sake? I’m not saying you have to alter your entire personality for this man. But Kole runs a business, and he’s asked you to accompany him to help. The least you can do is act the part and stop being so bloody drab!”

Tasha stared mutely at her mother. The fact that Laura was right only made things worse. Tasha hadn’t thought of it like that, but of course while Kole worked he would be advertising his business to all the guests at the wedding, and he might get more bookings on the day. It did make sense to smarten herself up a bit.

She looked down, tired and dispirited. She’d spent the morning at work having trouble concentrating because all she could think about was the evening before and how much she’d enjoyed herself. Then Maisey had insisted on going through her Christmas shopping list, which only served to remind Tasha that Midsummer’s Eve was two nights away, and after that this
lovely time she was having would be over. And then she worried because she knew she’d fallen for Kole, and she was going to lose both him and the fucking shop. And now her mother was nagging her, and making her feel fourteen all over again.

Laura studied her for a moment, then turned away wordlessly and went over to the till. She paid for the pink top, came and took Tasha’s hand this time, and led her out of the shop and toward a local café.

Kerikeri was full of bustling holidaymakers in shorts and T-shirts eating ice creams, but they found a table on the pavement, and ordered an iced coffee.

“Would you like a piece of cake to go with that?” the waitress asked. “We do a lovely chocolate brownie, and a great carrot cake.”

“No, thank you,” Laura said smoothly before Tasha could reply. “You’re putting on weight,” she declared to her daughter once the waitress had walked off.

Tasha didn’t have the energy to argue. “Thanks.”

Laura tipped her sunhat carefully to shade her face from the sun’s rays. “Now I know there’s something wrong. You would never normally let me get away with that.”

“I’m fine.”

Laura leaned forward, and to Tasha’s surprise, picked up her hand and held it in her own.

“You’re not. What’s the matter, sweetie?”

“I just feel a bit…flat.”

“Why? I thought you’d be all buzzy now you’re seeing Kole. He’s such a lovely young man. Very alpha male. Just what you need.”

Tasha blew out a long breath. “I’m not ‘seeing’ him. Well, I am, but not the way you think. It’s a finite fling. It finishes on Sunday.”

“Goodness. Why have you given it a use-by date?”

“It’s complicated,” Tasha said softly. She didn’t want to explain about the bet.

Laura stroked her hand. “Sweetie, you obviously like this man. Perhaps you should rethink the situation?”

“I…” Tasha retrieved her hand as the waitress came out with their iced coffees. She gathered her thoughts while she stirred the straw in the creamy cold mixture, then took a long sip. “I do like him.”

“Does he like you?”
“Yes, I think so.”

“Then…”

“It’s complicated, Mum. You remember what happened to Harry?”

“His brother? Of course. That poor family, such a tragedy. Do you ever hear from Skye?”

“Yes, apparently she’s in Germany at the moment. Anyway, when Harry died it broke Kole’s heart, as you would expect it to. And because of that, I think he’s determined never to love anyone again, because he’s afraid of losing them.”

Laura thought about that as she sipped her iced coffee delicately. “But that’s stupid,” she concluded. “You can’t avoid having a relationship just because it might come to an end.”

“Hey, you know that, and I know that…”

“You want me to talk to him?”

“Good God, no.” Tasha spoke with horror. “Swear to me you won’t.”

Laura waved a hand. “I won’t, I promise. But someone needs to.”

“I don’t know, Mum, I think it’s something he’s going to have to come to terms with himself. I suppose one day he’ll meet a girl he won’t be able to keep away from, and that will change the way he thinks about love. But I don’t think that girl is me.” The words came out sounding a lot sadder than she’d thought they would.

“Rubbish,” Laura scoffed. “I’ve seen the way he looks at you. You are totally the woman for him, darling. But what you have to understand is that sometimes it takes a little effort to get the guy you want.”

Tasha frowned. “I am not going on a diet.”

“I don’t mean that. Not that it would hurt in your case.” She ignored Tasha’s rolling of the eyes. “Look, men can be surprisingly dense, even the clever ones. They don’t always realize what they want is right under their noses. Sometimes you have to show them what their greatest desire is.”

“You’re saying I have to manipulate him into loving me? That doesn’t sound very romantic.”

Laura gave an exasperated sigh and banged on the table. “You girls of today!” Her voice held a surprising note of determination. “You shout about feminism and women’s rights and think if a man pays for dinner he’s being sexist, and yet on the other hand you complain if they’re not romantic. You want equality and for them to respect you, and you refuse to change
for them, as if doing so means you’re giving up your freedom. But you don’t understand that a successful relationship relies on compromise and on the two of you adjusting until you match. It’s like you’re a round beaker and he’s a square block of ice. The two don’t fit! But if you melt him a little…” Her lips curved.

Tasha’s head spun. “But surely that’s not always the case? We’re all told to wait for Mr. Right, like there’s one man out there who’s absolutely perfect for us.”

“Honey, I’m sorry to tell you this, but no man is perfect. It’s a sliding scale—some are more perfect than others. But I’m sorry to tell you there won’t be one man out there who you will be a hundred percent compatible with. To make a relationship work, to make sure you fit together, you will both have to adjust.”

“And if I refuse?”

Laura shrugged. “Why do you think the divorce rate is so high? In the old days, if we broke a vase, we fixed it—we didn’t throw it away and get a new one. Relationships don’t just happen. They have to be worked at.”

“You’ve been divorced three times,” Tasha pointed out. “You’re hardly an expert on lasting relationships.

“Sweetie, I haven’t had three failed marriages, I’ve had three successful ones that came to an end for various reasons. George and I have been together five years now. Do you think when we first met we immediately knew we wanted to marry each other? Of course not! He did lots of things that annoyed me, and I’m sure I did lots of things that annoyed him too. But I wanted him. So I adjusted, I compromised, and I made him realize he didn’t want to live without me.” She smiled, like a cat that not only had the cream but ten tins of tuna as well.

Laura went on to change the subject, and Tasha let her, not wanting to talk any further about Kole or her mother’s marriages. But when they’d finished their drinks and parted ways, Tasha thought about what she’d said as she walked to her car and drove the hour or so home to Mangonui.

For as long as she could remember, she’d rebelled against her mother’s attitude toward men and thought her weak for changing herself to fit her partners. Tasha had been determined never to be like that.

But for the first time, she began to wonder if her point of view was somewhat childish. Sure, it was important to her to remain self-sufficient, not to be in thrall to a man, and to ensure
her partner respected her and listened to her opinions and points of view. But when it came to men, what did she really know? She’d had three rather dismal relationships, the longest of which had ended because the guy had gone off with someone else. Deep down, she knew she’d never thrown off the fear that Lewis’s betrayal had cast over her. It had definitely contributed to her fiercely independent streak. She’d always blamed her attitude toward relationships on her mother, but if she was true to herself—and now she realized she probably hadn’t been in the past—her failure to keep Lewis interested had been more of a factor than she’d thought. Of course, his straying wasn’t all down to her. But it had engendered a feeling of inadequacy within her that had obviously helped to form her current temperament.

So where did that leave her and Kole? They were both screwed up in their own, individual ways. Could they ever make it work? Would he ever be able to accept that love didn’t come with a guarantee? And could she bring herself to believe she could influence how he felt about her by changing the way she acted toward him?

She pulled up outside his house and checked her watch. It was only just gone five and he’d had an appointment over on Ninety Mile Beach photographing some annual surfing competition, so she wasn’t surprised to see his car missing from the drive. Luckily, he’d given her a key for the few days she was staying with him, so she let herself in, poured a glass of wine, took it onto the deck, and sat and watched the boats in the harbor, lost in thought.

The front door opened around an hour later, and she rose and went into the house to meet him. Her heart swelled as he closed the door and dumped his bag on the floor then came straight over to her, his face lighting up.

“Hey you.” He picked her up and sat her on the worktop, then wrapped his arms around her and held her tightly. “I’ve missed you.”

She pressed her nose into his T-shirt and inhaled the scent of sea, barbecued food, and hot man, touched by his heartfelt hug. “Me too.” Then she pushed back, raised her head, and smiled up at him. His cheekbones and nose were red, his lips dry. “You’ve caught the sun. Didn’t you wear a hat?”

“I did, I swear. It was fucking hot out there though.” He gave her a quick kiss. “Remind me to take sun lotion tomorrow.” Then he kissed her again, longer this time.

She sighed happily and kissed him back, and made no objection when he lifted her and carried her into the bedroom. They opened the doors to the deck and let the evening sun spill into
the room, along with the sound of the cicadas in the bush, and made love slowly, sensuously, as though they had all the time in the world.
Chapter Twenty-Seven

Midsummer’s Eve dawned bright and sunny. Tasha was relieved for the bride’s sake. How awful it must be to plan a summer wedding and then have it ruined by rain. But her relief was also tinged with a strange sense of disbelief. Her mood demanded thunder and lightning, or some illustration at least of how she felt that this fling was due to come to an end.

Several times during the previous evening, and when they woke—as usual—in the night to make love, she went to talk to Kole about their predicament. But each time the words refused to leave her lips. She didn’t doubt he had some affection for her. And clearly he was enjoying their affair. But was it more than that? Her heart told her yes, but her instincts also reminded her of his words when they’d arranged the bet. *I want that shop. And I’m going to get it.* He’d told her blatantly, with no attempt to hide the fact he’d go all out to win. *But then that’s it... I’m not looking for a relationship. And I don’t want you blaming me when you lose the shop and your heart.* He’d been very clear. And she couldn’t shake the small voice in her head that told her on Sunday at one o’clock when they sat in Aqua Blue, Joss and Maisey would proclaim him the winner, and Kole would rub his hands and give her a gleeful look before walking off without a backward glance.

So she didn’t say anything, and instead tried to put it all to the back of her mind and concentrate on the day.

They were up and about early, as Kole had to go first to the bride’s home and take photos of her getting ready for her big day. Deciding to shower together caused a slight delay. Kole, unable to resist her slippery body, turned her around, planted her hands on the tiles, and proceeded to take her from behind until her cries of pleasure mingled with the steam and filled the room.

Afterward, while she finished washing her hair and then dried off, he shaved over the sink, a towel wrapped around his waist. She cast frequent glances at him, unable to tear her eyes away from the hundred percent masculine act as he talked about the program for the day.

Eventually, though, he rinsed the razor in the water, meeting her eyes in the mirror, a smile on his lips. “You’re not listening to a word I’m saying, are you?”

She blinked. “Um, sorry. You just look so...” Her voice tailed off, lust sweeping over her again.
His lips curved even more. “I take it all back. You are insatiable.” His gaze returned to the mirror, and he tipped his head back to shave up to his chin.

She watched him helplessly. “It’s your fault,” she said, somewhat sulkily. “I’m sure you’re doing it on purpose.”

He chuckled, rinsed the razor again, and dried his face. Then he splashed on some aftershave, wincing as it obviously stung. “Ouch.”

Finally, he turned to wrap his arms around her. Still naked, she shivered as his hands skimmed her skin. “Ooh.”

“Hold that thought,” he said, amused. He bent his head and kissed her, enveloping her in the scent of sandalwood, and she sighed, opening her mouth to his searching tongue. But all too soon, he pulled back, giving her a parting wink as he left.

Muttering to herself, she took a little time to put on some makeup in the bathroom mirror while he dressed in the bedroom. She didn’t want anything heavy, and avoided thick foundation and too much color, but smoothed on some concealer, brushed some pale pink across her lids with a touch of dark eyeliner, and finished with a coat of mascara and a slick of lip gloss. Pleased with the overall effect, and trying not to think of her mother’s instruction to “melt him a little…” she went into the bedroom to find Kole had already dressed. Hearing metallic sounds in the living room and realizing he must be preparing his camera equipment, she decided to get dressed.

She dried her hair and pinned it up, letting a few strands fall around her face, then pulled on her new pink top. She scowled at herself in the mirror as she did so, but watched her eyebrows rise as the top settled around her curves, the bright color giving her skin a pretty glow. Not bad, actually, she had to concede. She teamed it with a pair of thin black trousers, and was just pulling on some strappy but comfortable sandals when Kole came into the room.

Tasha watched him in the mirror and saw the look of surprise and admiration on his face when his gaze fell on her. It reflected hers exactly as she saw his outfit. He wore a dark navy business suit with a white shirt and a light blue-and-pink striped tie. She hadn’t seen him in a suit for ages, and the effect took her breath away.

“Wow,” he said. His eyes creased as he came over and rested a hand on her hip. “Natasha Wilde in pink. I never thought I’d see the day!”
“My mother’s influence,” she admitted, fingering his tie. Her full name sounded odd coming from his lips. It made her tingle, as if the use of it gave him some kind of power over her. “You look gorgeous.”

“Thank you. And pink suits you. Your mother clearly knows what she’s talking about.”

Laura’s words filtered through her head. *Men can be surprisingly dense, even the clever ones.* Tasha gave a small laugh and cupped his face, her thumb stroking his smooth chin. “We don’t make a bad couple.”

She hadn’t meant anything deeper than a comment about how they looked good together. Kole’s smile faded, though, and for a brief moment his eyes searched hers. Her breath caught in her throat. Did he think she was implying she wanted something more? And if so, what would his reaction be?

To her surprise, he said nothing, just leaned forward and touched his lips to her forehead. Then he pulled back and held out his hand. “Ready?”

She nodded, not sure what to say, and he led her into the kitchen where they proceeded to move the camera equipment to the car. He didn’t mention her comment, and neither did she.

After she’d lugged the last case to the car, she put her hands on her hips and looked around.

“What?” he asked, following her gaze.

“Just looking for the kitchen sink.”

He gave her a sarcastic look and shut the lid. “It’s all necessary, I assure you.”

“What the hell is it all?”

They walked back inside so she could collect her handbag, and he locked the front door, and then they both got into the car, Kole slipping off his jacket and laying it on the back seat first.

“Stuff,” he said, plugging in his seatbelt. “Tripods, lenses, spare batteries, flashes, spare cameras.”

“Jeez.”

He started the car and reversed out of the drive. “It’s the most important day of this couple’s life. That’s quite a responsibility. If I get halfway through and drop the fucking camera, I have to have backup equipment.”
“I suppose.” She studied him as he headed the car onto the road. It was already warm, and she knew within a couple of hours he’d have loosened his tie and rolled up his shirt sleeves. His hair would curl around his temples, and his body would warm his aftershave to enable it to linger for most of the day. “I find it interesting you call a wedding the most important day of your life,” she said. “Do you really think it is?”

He didn’t look across at her, apparently concentrating on the road. “I don’t know. It seems an awful lot of fuss for one day. And yet, I was talking to Annie, and…” His voice tailed off.

“And what?”

He indicated and slowed to turn onto the state highway, then accelerated away. “I’d never really understood why people want to get married. They pay tens of thousands of dollars, buy outfits they’ll never wear again for the rest of their lives, and swear to stay with one person forever.”

“It does seem incredible,” she murmured.

“And the whole ring thing, I just didn’t get it. It seemed as if you’re saying to the other person ‘hey, look, I’m sticking this ring on to remind you that you can’t fucking cheat, okay?’” Tasha smiled. “That’s one way of looking at it.”

“But Annie said when you meet the right person, you can’t bear to be apart from them. And when you are, you want your ring on their finger, to show everyone they belong to you.”

A shiver ran down Tasha’s spine like an ice cube.

“I’d never thought of it like that,” he said softly.

He glanced across at her and smiled before returning his gaze to the road.

Tasha looked out of the window, but her heart raced. She’d never thought to hear Kole Graham talk in such a way. Could he really be coming around to the idea of staying with one person, of settling down?

He changed the subject and started talking about his camera and what shots he needed for the day, and she asked questions, happy to listen to him discuss his business for once, as he didn’t talk about it much when they were together with their friends. But his words continued to circle in her head like toys on a baby’s mobile pinned above the cot. You want your ring on their finger, to show everyone they belong to you. She’d never thought about it like that either.

Up until that moment, she’d been coming to terms with the idea that she liked Kole a lot more than she’d thought she would, and she’d entertained the notion of them staying together,
maybe having something long term, perhaps even moving in together. But for the first time, she thought about where that could lead.

She’d never considered getting married before. When she and Maisey were young, they’d sometimes talked about it, and Maisey had been full of ideas for her dress and the reception and who she would have as her bridesmaids. But Tasha had always scoffed, unable to see herself in a big white gown, and hating the thought of having to “obey” a man and change her name to his. How insulting!

But sitting there next to Kole, listening to him talk about his business, she wondered how it would feel if he wore a ring on his finger, and she wore his. Whenever they were apart, she’d be able to touch that ring and remember he’d vowed to love her forever. And she’d know that every woman he came into contact with would see his ring and know he was spoken for. He would belong to her, and her alone. He’d always be by her side, there to love her, support her. And maybe one day, there would be babies, with his large hazel eyes, part of him and part of her…

Blinking hard, she forced her brain to do an emergency stop. *Jeez, Tasha!* What the hell was she doing, letting her mind run away like that? Thinking about extending their fling after Saturday was one thing. But marriage? Kids? Any mention of anything like that would send him running in the opposite direction like his arse was on fire.

And yet… He’d spoken to Annie about it. And implied he was changing his mind.

*It doesn’t matter.* There was no point in thinking that now. First, they had the wedding. Then they had to get through Sunday and sort out the whole issue with the shop. And maybe then, once it was all done and dusted, they’d be able to discuss what happened next. But not until then. And she wasn’t going to think about it again.
Chapter Twenty-Eight

The morning went fast, and Kole had to admit to rather enjoying himself. He’d done half a
dozens weddings in the past, and they weren’t usually his favorite events. The majority of
occasions where he took photographs were one-off events that could not be recaptured. But
weddings were worse than most. The brides he’d met so far had been stressed out of their heads,
far too worried about things going wrong to enjoy the day, plus there were the mothers of the
brides to contend with, most of whom were notoriously rude and demanding.

Today, though, the bride, a pretty young thing called Rachel, was calm and happy, and
although her mother fussed around her, she was pleasant enough and keen to help him wherever
she could. He tended to let the customer guide the relationship for the day—if they were the sort
who wanted him to be part of the furniture and do as he was told, he did his best to remain as
unobtrusive as possible and keep in the background. But when they reacted well to him, like
today, he was happy to join in with the conversation, to suggest different poses, to tease the
bridesmaids and flirt with Rachel’s mother, and generally to help the day be as pleasant and
stress-free as possible.

All the while he talked and directed and photographed, he was aware of Tasha at his side,
watching him. Once she had the hang of which lens was which, he was able to just say, “the
thirty-five please,” or “can you get the fifty,” and she would pass it to him. She helped him set up
the tripod, and adjusted the poses or clothing of the guests as he directed, always seeming to
know exactly what he wanted.

When they’d finished the getting ready shots, she helped him pack his gear away and carry
it back out to the car.

“To the church now?” she queried.

He shook his head, picking up his main camera. “A few shots of Rachel in the car first.
Then we’ll head off.” He checked the lens—yep, the fifty was on—and double checked the
battery levels. He didn’t want to have to stop halfway through if the battery ran out.

When he looked up, Tasha was smiling.

“What?” he said suspiciously.

“You’ve surprised me, that’s all. I’ve watched you take photos all my life, it seems. But
this is the first time I’ve seen you do a big event.”
He grinned. “Am I too bossy?”
“No, not at all. You’re in control. Patient and firm. Warm and funny. You’re perfect.”
He raised an eyebrow. “Can I have that in writing?”
Her admiring look turned exasperated. “I meant as a photographer. Not in life. There’s always room for improvement.”
Still, she had a warm look in her eyes, and it stayed with him as he took the shots of Rachel getting into the car.
When he’d done, he quickly put his camera away and jumped in the car beside Tasha, and they sped away to the church. “This is the worst time,” he admitted. “I need to take a few shots of the church before she arrives and then catch her walking down the aisle.”
“Well, don’t forget I’m here if you need me. Anything you want, just ask.”
He glanced across. “Anything?”
Her lips curved, and she tutted at his lewdness.
“You want me to shave again?” He’d seen the lust in her eyes when she’d watched him in the bathroom. No doubt women thought of men shaving the same way guys lusted after girls when they pulled on stockings.
She didn’t reply, just chuckled, and he grinned and returned his gaze to the road.
They arrived plenty of time before Rachel. The church sat high on a hill overlooking the glittering crescent of Doubtless Bay. The magnificent view would provide a wonderful backdrop to the wedding photos, he thought, his fingers itching to press the button and capture the jewel-like colors of the sea and sky.
He was able to get some decent shots of the church and the congregation before Rachel’s car pulled up. He took some of the bridesmaids helping her with her dress, and then more of her walking up to the church with her father, who looked fit to burst all the buttons on his jacket with pride.
After that, Kole set up the tripod to one side where he could remain inconspicuous but still have a great shot of the altar. Using a different lens, he could shoot from afar but get close-up images of the bride and groom, and capture every emotion on their faces.
Tasha stood beside him, quiet and attentive, and passed him the spare batteries when he needed to change. He heard her singing to the hymns, saw her drop her head in prayer. And he thought he heard her inhale as the bride and groom exchanged rings, but he couldn’t be sure.
Through the viewfinder, he caught the devotion on the groom’s face as he promised to love his new wife, “for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish,” as long as they lived. Even as he snapped away, Kole puzzled on the words. Could he imagine being in that position. Standing in front of a woman and vowing to love her forever, “forsaking all others”?

It was with surprise he realized promising to stay faithful was not what bothered him. Yes, he’d had a few girlfriends in his time, but fidelity was not an issue. The problem was more the notion of making a promise he wasn’t sure he could keep. How could he swear to love someone forever? He could say “I promise that, at this moment, I want to love you forever,” but the vows were not phrased that way. Did people not think about that? Or did they realize the foolishness of making such a promise, but just assume if they fell out of love, they’d get divorced?

A person staying with someone he or she didn’t love would be a huge mistake and waste of a life. But equally, he hated the thought of breaking a promise. How terrible to have vowed to love someone forever, and then one day to ask for divorce because you no longer did. He couldn’t imagine anything worse than being in love with someone who didn’t love you back. That was what had killed his brother. Harry’s girlfriend had broken up with him, and he’d driven off in a fury and ended up killing himself, and all because he loved the girl and didn’t want the relationship to end. Kole had refused to put himself in that position for so long, terrified of feeling the same way. How could he be sure?

*Sometimes you have to take that leap of faith,* Annie had said. *Carpe diem.*

The ceremony finished, and he didn’t have any time to think about it further because this was his busiest time of the day. Tasha helped him move his gear to the church entrance, and he took photos of the happy couple walking down the aisle, then it was shots of the two of them on the steps. After that it was time to move to the lawn, and luckily it hadn’t rained for a while so the grass was firm underfoot, and there wasn’t too much wind. They had their backs to the beautiful view, and the cornflower blue sky and the cerulean sea, along with the pohutukawa tree that arched above them with its Christmassy scarlet flowers, provided the perfect background for his shots.

He spent a long while taking photos, lots of the bride and groom alone, then with their parents, with the bridesmaids and the best man, with siblings and other relatives, and eventually with all the guests, lots of shots to enable him to pick the best and create the perfect album.
After that, he caught the couple being showered in confetti and getting into the car, and then it was off to the hall they’d hired. He captured the wedding breakfast, the speeches, the couple’s first dance, and then took shots of all the guests enjoying themselves as the evening reception began, and daylight began to fade. Some couples only wanted photos of the ceremony, some liked a few of the wedding breakfast and that was it, but today they’d asked him to stay until the evening do was underway, and he’d happily obliged for the extra money.

He worried Tasha would get bored, but she seemed to be enjoying herself and stayed close to him, keen to help wherever she could. Eventually, though, he’d finished. He caught the bride and groom and asked if there was anything else he could do, and Rachel hugged him and said he’d been terrific, and the groom shook his hand and told him to go home.

“Phew, what a day.” He drove home slowly, tired and with an aching neck after all the stooping to look in the camera, but pleased with how it had turned out.

“I don’t know how you do it.” Tasha had kicked off her shoes and now rolled her head back onto the seat rest. “You don’t stop.”

“I’m regular dynamo.”

“And some. I think half of New Zealand could be run on your energy.”

He laughed. “I’m tired tonight though.”

“I’m not surprised. Want an early night?”

He glanced across at her, but there was nothing in her eyes except genuine concern.

“Depends if you come with me.” He held her gaze long enough to show her the pun was intentional.

She reached out and held his hand. “Are you sure you don’t want to drop me off at my house tonight? I’ll understand.”

His heart skipped a beat. It was their last night together. Didn’t she want to spend it with him? “Is that what you want?”

“No,” she said softly.

He tightened his hand on hers. “Then you’re coming home with me.”

They didn’t say anything more for the last few miles. He pulled into the drive and turned off the engine, and then she helped him collect the cases from the car and carry them inside. Before he did anything else, while Tasha poured them both a glass of wine, he turned on his computer and unpacked the memory cards he’d used, slotted them in and downloaded all the
images onto the computer. She came to stand beside him as he flicked through them all, making sure they’d come out all right.

“Oh, Kole, they’re amazing.” She leaned on his shoulder to look more closely at the pictures of the bride and groom he had to admit looked stunning with the dazzling blues of Doubtless Bay behind them, the red pohutukawa flowers just entering the shot in the top corner.

Relieved everything looked okay, he saved them, backed them all up again on a portable disk drive, then closed the computer down. “Done.”

When he turned, Tasha was waiting for him. As he stood, she took his hand and led him toward the bedroom. It was only early in the evening, and the sun still hovered low over the horizon, flooding the room with a beautiful golden light. She opened the large glass sliding door to let the honey-like smell of the manuka bushes waft in, took his glass from his other hand, and placed them both on the bedside table. Then she began to unbutton his shirt.

He watched her, tired but happy she was there, enjoying the slide of her fingers against his skin as she unbuttoned down to his navel and then pushed the shirt off his shoulders to the floor. Her hands moved to the waistband of his trousers, and he let her undo them too while he toed off his shoes. When she’d undone the zipper, he took off the trousers and his socks, and turned back to her in his boxers, waiting for her to take them off too.

To his surprise, she didn’t, but quickly stripped off her own trousers and the pretty pink top, and stood before him in her underwear, a lovely matching light pink lacy bra and panties.

He went to put his hands on her hips, but she shook her head and turned him, drew back the duvet, and motioned to the bed. “Get in,” she instructed. “Lie on your front.”

He did so, only realizing what she was up to when he saw her holding the small bottle of olive oil he kept in the cupboard.

“Your shoulders are all tense,” she said, placing the bottle on the table and climbing onto the bed. “First, we need to get you to relax.”

“I’m not going to be able to relax with you sitting on me dressed like that,” he said. He groaned as she straddled him, conscious of his growing erection pinned beneath him.

She leaned forward and retrieved the olive oil, poured a little onto her hands and rubbed them together, and then placed them on his shoulders. “Hush,” she whispered. “Just enjoy.”
Kole sighed as her hands stroked slowly down his back, then up his sides to his shoulders and down the tops of his arms. Maybe she was right—he’d just enjoy her touch for a while before he made a move on her.

For about ten minutes, she used long strokes, warming and relaxing his muscles. Then her touch became firmer, and she squeezed and massaged, kneading out the tenseness, using pressure to get right into the knots almost to the point of pain, but not quite. 

*She’s done this before,* he thought. To whom? An answering wave of jealousy surprised him. He didn’t want her hands touching another man like this. So intimate and tender.

Eventually, she returned to the long, gentle strokes, up his back, over his shoulders, down his back again, relaxing and caressing. He could feel the last dregs of the evening sun on his legs, smell the manuka in the bush. Somewhere, a morepork hooted, announcing the arrival of night. The glass of merlot threaded through his veins, unravelling him like a skein of wool.

And gradually, as if a blanket had been shaken to settle over him, he fell asleep.
When Kole awoke about an hour later, Tasha was lying on her side, facing him. In the light of the waning moon, she watched him rise slowly to consciousness, his body stirring, his eyes fluttering open confused at first, then finally registering where he was like booting up a computer.

He lifted his head and looked at the clock, saw it was only nine, and rolled onto his side. “Jeez, I’m sorry. I dozed off.”

She smiled. “That was the plan. You were worn out.”

He rubbed his face then ran his hand through his hair. “I feel all disoriented. I never go to sleep earlier than eleven.”

“You worked hard today. You deserve an early night.”

She half-expected him to take her in his arms, but instead he pushed himself up and padded to the bathroom. When he came out, he walked over to the window and looked at the harbor. “It’s Midsummer’s Eve,” he said.

Tasha rose and walked to stand beside him. “Longest day.”

He moved to stand behind her, and wrapped his arms around her. “The sun sets earlier here than in the rest of New Zealand, did you know?”

“I didn’t, actually.”

“Our longest days are shorter than Dunedin’s, for example. Although our shortest days are longer, if that makes any sense.”

“Not really, no.”

He chuckled into her ear. “It sounded great in my head.” He pressed his lips to the sensitive skin behind her ear.

She tipped her head to the side so he could kiss her neck. “A Midsummer Night’s Dream is my favorite Shakespeare play.”

“I prefer the history plays, but it is entertaining.” His lips trailed down her neck, making her shiver. “‘The course of true love never did run smooth.’”

Tasha’s breath hitched. Why had he chosen that line to quote? He continued to kiss her shoulder, then back up to her ear, and she decided he hadn’t meant it to have meaning.

“‘Methought I was enamored of an ass,’” she said.
That made him laugh. He fastened his mouth on the crook of her neck and sucked hard, and she gasped. “Ouch! You’ll give me a hickey!”

He stroked the area with a finger. “Yep. Serves you right for being cheeky.” He began to undo her bra. “I’m going to mark you tonight. Let everyone know you’re mine.”

It was such a similar comment to what he’d said about the wedding rings she couldn’t think what to say. As he unfastened her bra and drew the straps down her arms, her mind spun with confusion. Was he implying this might go further? That he wanted to continue to see her? If that wasn’t the case and he still had every intention of finishing this tomorrow—if this really was all about the bet—it was an exceedingly cruel joke. But then that’s it... I’m not looking for a relationship. And I don’t want you blaming me when you lose the shop and your heart. She closed her eyes as his warm hands settled on her breasts. If he said goodbye to her tomorrow, if he laughed when he won the bet, she’d never be able to forgive him.

He must have felt her tense, because he nuzzled her ear and said, “It must be my turn to relax you.” He lifted her breasts in his palms, stroked his thumbs across her nipples. An “aah” of pleasure escaped her lips, and he murmured his appreciation. “You have the sexiest body of any woman I’ve ever met,” he whispered. He slid his right hand down her stomach, and then lower, his fingers sneaking beneath the elastic of her panties to cup her mound. “I want you, Tasha Wilde. I want to fill you up and hear you scream my name as you come. Will you do that for me?”

She rested her head back on his shoulder as he slipped a finger down into her folds. “Yes…”

“Tell me you want me.” His deep voice sent ripples of desire through her.

“I want you…”

He moved his finger inside her, then drew her moisture up to her clit and began to arouse her. “I could play with you for hours. And in fact, I think I will. You’re in no rush to get to sleep tonight, are you?”

Her lips parted at the notion of him touching her like this in the darkness. “No…”

“So many things I could do to you, Tash.” He squeezed her nipple with his fingers, tugging it gently until she arched her back and moaned. “So much we could do to each other, if only we had the time.”
His words stirred her, made her brain spin again. Hope kept mixing with fear he was only playing with her, but she couldn’t bring herself to ask him the truth.

“I want to pleasure you every way a man can pleasure a woman. Kiss you everywhere. Get to know every freckle on your body, every inch of skin.” Again, he moved his finger inside her, collecting more of her slippery moisture and bringing it up to coat her folds. “Would you like that?”

“Yes…” She felt half-drunk, in a sexual haze, stirred by his deep, sexy voice, his sure touch, the feel of his hard erection pressing against her bottom through his boxers.

“You’re so wet already.” He nipped her ear.

She gave a huff of displeasure. “Don’t embarrass me.”

“I’m not. It’s sexy to talk about what happens to our bodies when we’re aroused.” He removed his hand from her panties and returned it to her breasts. The fingers of both his hands squeezed her nipples. “These become engorged when you’re turned on. I love how they swell, and they’re soft, like plush velvet. And then I do this—” he tugged them again “—and they tighten like magic into tiny, hard buttons.” He rubbed his thumbs over them. “They’re beautiful.”

She couldn’t stop herself pushing back with her hips against his erection. “Mmm…”

“And see what you do to me?” He stepped back a second, lost the boxers, then returned, nestling his erection between the cheeks of her bottom, only the panties separating them. “Just one look from you, Tash, gets me like this. And the thought of tasting you, or sliding into you and filling you up, makes me swell.” He nipped her ear again. “Open your legs.”

She lowered her hands to her panties, but he pushed them away. “Leave them on.”

Puzzled, she did as he said and widened her legs, and leaned against the window again as he moved his erection beneath her. The head slid along the crotch of her panties, which she knew must be soaked by now, and she groaned when he returned his hands to her breasts.

He kissed her ear. “Tell me what you thought about last time you pleasured yourself.”

Her jaw dropped. “Kole!”

“Don’t be coy. I’ll tell you what I thought about. I imagined you before me on all fours like you were the other day. You looked fucking amazing. I could see your lips here glistening—” he thrust his erection forward to illustrate where he meant “—and your breasts swung every time I thrust.”

Tasha’s cheeks grew warm. He was making her blush again! “Please…”
“Tell me.” He continued to give small movements of his hips, arousing her through the thin panties, and his right hand slid down and beneath the elastic again to continue stroking her clit.

“I thought of you.” There, she’d said it.

“What was I doing?”

She decided he’d had his way long enough. “Fucking me.”

He paused temporarily, and then gave a deep, sexy laugh. “How was I fucking you, Tasha?”

“Same way. From behind.”

“Why?”

“Because it feels fucking amazing.” She groaned as he swapped his hand to her right breast and squeezed her nipple. Her mother’s words flared in her head. *Melt him a little...* “Then you pulled out,” she whispered. “And pushed me down onto the bed.”

His hand circled through her slippery flesh, bringing her closer and closer to her climax.

“And then what?” His voice had turned husky. She was getting to him.

“You parted my legs. Pushed up my knee.” She bit her bottom lip as lifted the hand in her panties to her breast, transferring some of the silky wetness to her nipple before returning it to stroke her. This time, when his other hand rubbed her nipple, the sensation was electrifying.

“Oh...”

“Then what did I do?”

Her breaths came hard and fast. “You took some lube and squeezed it onto your fingers, and smoothed it down between my cheeks...”

His fingers circled faster. “And then...”

“You pushed your fingers into me.”

“Where, Tasha?”

“Mmm...into my arse...”

He fastened his mouth onto her neck and sucked gently. “And then?”

“Mmm...”

“Come on,” he chided. “My sexy little whore. What did I do next?”

She was so close to coming. She licked her lips and arched her back. “You slid the tip of your erection inside.”

“And then?”
“You fucked me there,” she whispered. Just the thought was enough to tip her over the edge. Her muscles clenched and she came, hard and fast, clutching his hand to stop him pulling away, not that he seemed inclined to.

He let her finish, but immediately turned her around. He dropped to his haunches before her and pulled down her panties, removed them, then rose to stand before her. Her head still spinning, she gasped as he pressed his nose into the wet cotton before dropping it to the floor.

“Kole!”

He laughed then, and planting his hands beneath her butt, lifted her up and pressed her against the glass. It was cold against her hot skin, and she squealed.

“Another punishment,” he said. “For nearly make me come just by talking to me.” He lowered her a little, and the tip of his erection parted her lips.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him, plunging her tongue into his mouth. He groaned and lowered her more, and she slid down his erection to the root, until she was impaled on him.

“Fuck,” he said, with feeling. He waited, letting her adjust, and she slid her hands into his hair and clutched them at the sensation of him inside her, stretching and filling and possessing her completely.

Holding her tightly, he slid out a little, then thrust back in.

“Oh.” She kissed him, deeper this time.

He thrust again, and again, setting up a punishing pace. Tasha couldn’t move, but she was content to let him take her. And amazingly, as he thrust, she began to feel another climax building.

“Slower,” she said, gasping. “Let me catch up.”

He gave a deep groan and his fingers dug into her butt, but he slowed nevertheless, grinding against her with each movement of his hips. “Quick, Tash,” he muttered. “I can’t hold on for long.”

“No need…to worry…here it…comes…” She gave into the sensations and clamped around him, and he let out a triumphant yell and thrust as his own climax hit. He pumped hard, plunging deep into her, and even as her body pulsed, she was aware of his muscles tightening, his hips jerking as he spilled into her.
They were both panting by the time they’d finished, and when he finally withdrew and lowered her down, it was all she could do to make it to the bed and collapse next to him.

“Jesus. You’ll be the death of me.” He threw one arm across his face, his chest heaving.

“You really do need a ‘Treat with Caution’ sign stuck on you.”

Tasha curled up beside him, exhausted, sated, and slightly smug. “Thank you.”

He gave a short laugh. “Thank you.”

“I mean it.” She kissed his chest, suddenly very tired. “I’ve enjoyed this, Kole. Whatever happens, I’ve had a great time.”

“Lovers, to bed; ‘tis almost fairy time,” he said, laughter in his voice.

She smiled in the semi-darkness. And almost immediately, she felt asleep.
Chapter Thirty

When Tasha finally awoke to see sunlight, she rolled over and found the bed beside her empty. Kole’s voice murmured from the living room, but she couldn’t hear anyone else, so presumably he was on the phone.

She lay on her back for a while, looking up at the ceiling. In spite of his proposal to keep her up all night, he’d let her sleep, only rousing her once in the early hours with soft kisses to make love to her before wrapping her in his arms and letting her doze once again.

It had been a wonderful few days, and it had felt almost as if they’d been suspended in time. But this morning the hands of the clock would finally move forward.

Who was he talking to? She fought against an urge to eavesdrop, scolded herself for even thinking about it, and then curiosity overcame her. She crept to the door and strained her ears to see if she could make out who he was talking to.

“…meet at the shop,” he murmured. “And then sign the contract, because there’s no time to waste.”

Her jaw dropped, and she backed away to the bed and sat heavily. Midsummer Night had passed, taking the dream with it. And reality hit her with the force of a sledgehammer.

He wasn’t out there thinking romantic thoughts about how much he’d enjoyed their time together. He was planning the signing of the contract for the shop. That was the only thing he’d been interested in all along. And she’d been stupid to think otherwise.

_Stupid, stupid, stupid._

“Morning.”

Her head snapped around at the sound of his voice in the doorway to find him leaning against the doorjamb. He wore jeans and a T-shirt, although he was barefoot. He looked slightly amused. “You all right?”

“Yes. Of course. Why shouldn’t I be?” She spoke more sharply than she’d meant.

He held up a hand. “Okay, just asking. You want a coffee?”

“Sure. Thanks.”

He nodded and walked off.
Cursing herself, she rose and visited the bathroom, dressed quickly, and went into the kitchen. He turned from his computer as she came out and gestured to the worktop. “Coffee’s in the pot.”

Silently, she poured herself a cup. Her heart hammered, but she forced herself to keep her cool. “You’re up early.”

“Thought I’d get started on the wedding pics, plus I have an appointment at nine.” He glanced at her, sipped his coffee, then returned to the screen.

“Oh.” Yesterday, she’d thought maybe they’d have a quiet Sunday morning together, perhaps even start talking about what had happened, and where they would go from here. But clearly, that wasn’t going to happen.

Holding her cup, she wandered out onto the deck. The harbor was already busy, fishermen going out for the day on the boats, holidaymakers catching an early breakfast before heading for the beach. She couldn’t quite see the part of the waterfront where the shop was, but she could imagine Andrew, newly returned from Peru, opening it up, walking through rooms, checking it was ready for the new tenant.

It should have been her. Her stomach clenched. Maisey was going to kill her. What were they going to do for a shop now? Her eyes filled with tears, and the harbor blurred.

Foosteps sounded on the floor behind her, and then Kole appeared at her side. He stood next to her, coffee in hand, looking down at the harbor, his arm only an inch from hers, but it felt like a mile. He’s withdrawn, she thought sadly. She could feel him pulling further away from her with each passing second. It had all been a sham, a fabrication, carefully engineered so he would get the shop.

Ice settled around her heart.

She finished off her coffee, blinking away her tears. “I’d better get going.”

He looked at her, eyebrows rising. “You sure?”

“Well, you have an appointment, and I’m sure I have stuff to do.”

His eyes met hers, cool and indecipherable. “Okay.”

She bit her bottom lip. Disbelief made her head spin. Was this really how it was going to end? All that passion, the magic that had hung in the air the night before like fairy dust, had vanished in the morning mist, just like in the Shakespeare play.

Tasha turned and went back into the house.
Leaving her cup on the counter—he could damn well wash it up—she quickly stuffed her clothes and bathroom bits into her bag, shouldered it, and walked back into the living room.

He stood by the front door, his arms folded. “Are you still going to Aqua Blue at one?” he asked as she approached.

Clenching the bag handle tightly, she put on a breezy voice. “Of course. See you there?”

He gave a sharp nod.

She hesitated. She couldn’t leave like this. Okay, she might have lost the bet, but even so, she’d meant everything she’d said over the past eight days, even if he didn’t. Pride stopped her falling into his arms and declaring how she felt, but she did walk right up to him, stretch up on tiptoe, and press her lips to his.

To her relief, he wrapped his arms around her and returned the kiss, and even when he finally pulled away, his arms remained there for a while longer, holding her tightly. But eventually he dropped them, and she gave him a bright smile, walked out of the door, and got into the car.

*This is what shock feels like.* She felt cold, even though the sun beamed down on the small town and the tarmac ahead of her shimmered as she pulled away. Her head ached, and she felt slightly unwell.

*Of course you feel unwell,* she thought angrily, swerving to avoid a bird of prey that hovered over a dead possum on the road. *You’ve made a fool of yourself, and you’ve lost the one man you’ve ever really loved.* No wonder she felt like she might throw up. Her throat was tight, her eyes stinging with unshed tears. She had to get home soon, or she’d end up breaking down in public, and she’d never forgive herself for that.

She arrived home in one piece and let herself in. The sound of Maisey’s singing echoed from the shower, so luckily Tasha didn’t have to speak to her. She scribbled her a quick note, “Maisey, I’m home, dead tired, gonna catch an hour or two before we go out for lunch,” left it on the counter, and went to her room.

She stripped and pulled on an old pair of pajamas, climbed into bed, and pulled the duvet over her, even though it was a bit stuffy in the room. Her old childhood bear sat on the bedside table, and she reached over and hugged him to her, the first time she’d done so in years.

“I’ve been stupid, Bear,” she whispered, as the tears finally began to fall. “What am I going to do?”
She dozed on and off for a couple of hours in the end, and awoke with a muzzy head and a dry mouth. She wandered out into the kitchen and helped herself to some orange juice.

“Oh, you’re up.” Maisey appeared around the corner, looking like one of the fairies from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, dressed in a beautiful floaty blue skirt and a white top, her hair full of sparkly silver clips. She stopped and stared at Tasha. “Jeez. What happened to you?”

Tasha ran a hand through her hair. “I may need a shower.”

“You think? You look like you’ve been pulled through a hedge backward.”

Tasha mumbled something and walked back to her bedroom.

Maisey followed her and leaned against the door. “So, today’s the day, eh?”

“I guess.” Tasha opened up her wardrobe and pulled out a pair of jeans.

“You all ready for the final dénouement?”

Tasha bit her lip, opened a drawer, and pretended to be choosing a T-shirt. She was *not* going to cry in front of her best friend. “Yep. All ready.”

“Tash?” Maisey spoke softly. “Are you okay?”

Emotion washed over her in an inexorable wave, and she pressed a hand to her mouth.

“Oh no.” Maisey ran over to her and enveloped her in a hug. “No, no, no.”

“I’m sorry.” It came out as a squeak, and she buried her head in Maisey’s shoulder. “I’m sorry I’ve lost the shop.”

“Fuck the shop,” Maisey said fiercely. “What are you doing falling for my idiot brother?”

“I couldn’t help it.” Tasha took big, gulping breaths. “You were right. He did have a secret weapon.”

“I really don’t want to hear about that.”

Tasha would have laughed, but she felt so sad she couldn’t even raise a smile. “The whole thing was idiotic, and I shouldn’t have done it. I should have realized I didn’t stand a chance.”

“Ssh…” Maisey rubbed her back. “It’s okay, everything’s going to be okay…”

“It’s not. I’ve fallen for him, and he’s never going to settle down. He’s taken the shop *and* my heart, Maisey. And he was so cold and calculating about it.” Tasha couldn’t believe how much it hurt. “I really thought he was starting to feel something for me, but it was all an act. I feel so stupid.”
“I’m going to have words with him about that.” Maisey spoke sharply. “But look, you really mustn’t worry. You’ve done nothing wrong, all you did was open the doors to feelings you’d obviously been hiding for a while. It’s not surprising; you’ve been friends for a long time.”

Tasha rested her cheek on Maisey’s shoulder. “But how come I was the one who fell in love? Why didn’t it happen to him?”

“I don’t know, honey. You know Kole. It’ll have to be someone special to capture his heart. Look, why don’t you go and have a shower? We’ll do your hair nice, get you dressed in something fancy, and show that idiot brother of mine what he’s missing?”

“Okay.” Tasha pulled back and wiped her face. “Maisey, I know he’s your brother. And I know we made that stupid bet. But as you say, we’ve been friends for a long time. And he’s been exceptionally cruel to me. I’ll never be able to forgive him.”

Maisey’s gentle face creased with concern. “Don’t say that.”

Tasha turned away. Of course Maisey would defend her brother and be on his side. It was going to make things very awkward in the future. Because Tasha wasn’t sure she ever wanted to see Kole again. “I’ll go and have a shower.”

She spent a long time under the hot spray, then took time to cut and paint her toenails before coming back out to the bedroom. Maisey dried her hair for her, and then braided it in a French pleat, fastening the end with an elastic band topped with a red rose.

Tasha chose a scarlet T-shirt to match the rose and slipped it on. Part of her wanted to wear black, because it made her feel protected, as if it somehow shielded her emotions, but the other half agreed with Maisey. She wanted to show him what he was missing.

She’d already decided that once Maisey and Joss had made their decision, she’d take Kole to one side to talk. She wanted him to know exactly how much he’d hurt her, and explain to him that even though they’d made the bet, he should have realized she’d fallen for him.

A voice nagged in her head, *Didn’t you tell him, You really think men are the only ones who can have a fling without getting their emotions involved?* Yes, she thought, I did, but even so… He should have known the way she was reacting to him wasn’t fake. Hadn’t he said to her, *I don’t want you faking anything, physical or emotional?* Did he really think her so manipulative she could have put on an act like that?

She added a touch of powder and lip gloss, but decided to keep it natural. And then she was ready.
“We might as well walk down,” Maisey said, checking her watch. “It’s half twelve.”

“Okay.” Tasha’s heart thumped madly while her stomach churned, and she realized she hadn’t eaten anything all day. But it was too late to think about breakfast now. She’d force down some lunch, and then this stupid farce would all be over.
Chapter Thirty-One

Kole saw Tasha even before she opened the door to Aqua Blue, spotting her curvy form as she walked along the waterfront with his sister, approaching the restaurant.

His heart gave a massive thump, but he stayed where he was, sitting back in the chair, feet resting on the seat in front of him, crossed at the ankles. Next to him, Joss also saw them coming and glanced over at him.

“It’s D-Day, mate.”

“Thanks. That’s just what I need.”

Fox, standing next to them, gave him a wry look. “Good luck.” He walked back into the kitchens, leaving them to it.

Tasha pushed open the door and entered, held it open for Maisey, and walked forward. She stopped as she saw him sitting to one side, and her breasts rose as she inhaled sharply.

He lifted a hand. “Hey.”

She shoved hers in her pockets and walked up to the table. “Afternoon.” Behind her glasses, her polished mahogany eyes met his, carefully blank. Her face was pale, her hair drawn back, but in the scarlet T-shirt she looked the most beautiful creature he’d ever seen.

He removed his feet from the chair and gestured to it. She glared at him, bent down and dusted it carefully, then sat. He bit back a laugh. *Keep it cool, dude.*

Joss smiled at Maisey as she took the seat beside him. “Everything okay?”

“All good.” Maisey looked at Kole. There was an element of steeliness to her gaze, and doubt flickered inside him. Why was she mad at him?

Tasha said nothing. She adjusted her cutlery, then rearranged the salt and pepper pots. He let a small smile touch his lips, his gaze caressing her ear and the curve of her neck. He saw a faint mark where her neck met her shoulder—the hickey he’d nearly given her the night before. She’d obviously forgotten about that. Luckily, he hadn’t sucked harder.

Conscious he was going to give himself a hard-on if he continued down that road, he wrenched his thoughts away and smiled at Fox who’d approached with an open bottle of champagne in a bucket of ice. “To celebrate,” Fox explained, adding a wink at him.

“Thanks.” Kole lifted the bottle out and began pouring them all a glass.
He stopped, however, when Tasha covered her glass with a hand. It was only when he looked up at her that he saw her face was like thunder.

“You have a fucking cheek,” she said in a menacingly soft voice. “Pouring champagne? Celebrating even before having the courtesy to at least listen to their decision?” She sat back, shaking her head, and looked out of the window. Anger radiated from her, pure and hot.

He looked at Maisey, who pulled an eek face then silently made the gesture of a cut across her throat. He caught the meaning. Let’s get this over with.

Pouring himself a glass of the champagne, he nodded to Joss.

The doctor cleared his throat. “Okay. So today’s the day. And it’s time for Maisey and me to announce our decision.”

Tasha didn’t look around, but continued to stare stonily out of the window.

Joss glanced at Kole, then carried on. “It wasn’t easy. It was quite clear to us you’ve both had a profound effect on the other. But we have to say, the winner is…” His eyes met Kole’s and his lips curved. “Tasha.”

Kole looked at Tasha. She blinked several times. He could almost see the news sinking into her brain like a hot stone into a pile of snow.

Eventually, she turned her head and stared at Joss. “What?”

He just smiled.

She looked at Maisey. “What?”

Maisey shrugged, and then she smiled too.

Finally, Tasha turned to look at Kole.

He met her gaze, and then slowly let the smile that had been waiting in the wings spread across his face.

Her lips parted, but for a while no words came out. Then, after about twenty seconds of silence, she said, “What?”

“Ever the poet,” he said. Pushing himself to his feet, he held out a hand. “Come on, Titania.”

Clearly puzzled, stunned into silence, she stood, took his hand, and let him lead her out of the restaurant. The sun dazzled them for a moment, and she shielded her eyes, blinking furiously.

He led her along the waterfront about twenty yards, then stopped and turned her toward the shop they had both wanted so badly.
Kole studied the temporary sign above the window that read “Treats to Tempt You”, hastily constructed by Maisey and Joss. In the window, he’d stuck a blown-up version of the photograph he’d taken of Tasha on the beach the day they made the bet, of the moment when he’d caught her laughing.

He turned to look at her. Her jaw had dropped again. Complete confusion shrouded her features.

She looked up at him. “What?”

He started laughing. “It’s yours, Tasha. Yours and Maisey’s, and Elle’s and Caitlin’s. You won, sweetheart.”

Her jaw snapped shut, and she frowned. “I don’t understand.”

He moved closer toward her and cupped her face in his hands. “You won the bet. I’ve completely fallen for you.”

Her lips parted again, and her gaze searched his face, her eyes wide, disbelieving. “You’re teasing me.”

“I’m really not.”

“But…this morning…” She looked completely baffled.

He stroked her cheek. “I’m sorry. That was unfair, and Maisey’s going to bollock me for it. But I needed a few hours to sort things out. I wanted to surprise you. Maisey and I went to see Andrew, and she’s signed all the documents. The shop’s yours.”

“But…what about your studio?”

“I’ve decided to stay working in Annie’s sleep-out. She never uses it anyway. I’m going to pay her rent and do it up properly, and she’s going to help out as my assistant. I like it there. I don’t really need a new place—people are just getting used to me being up there. And besides…” He kissed her nose. “I want you to have it.”

“But…” She continued to look nonplussed. “I saw you standing there looking at it the other day. You looked so determined.”

“Thursday, you mean? I went for a last look at the shop, and came to the conclusion I could do just as good a job at Annie’s place.”

“You decided that on Thursday?”

“Yes.”

She shook her head as if she didn’t believe him. “What about…” She bit her lip.
“Me and you?”
She nodded.

He pulled her into his arms. “I think I’ve tried to ignore how I felt about you because you were so young before. But spending so much time with you all week, having you in bed, letting myself think about what might be… I finally realized.”

“Realized what?”
He gave her an exasperated look. “Are you really not catching on here, Wilde?” He kissed her lips. “I love you.”

Her eyes widened. “What?”

“Jeez, don’t start that again.”

“No, but… Are you joking?”

“No, Tash. I’m not joking.” He knew Maisey, Joss, and Fox were watching from the restaurant, but he didn’t care. He wrapped his arms around her and gave her a long, slow kiss.

She stood stiff in his arms for a moment. And then, obviously realizing he was telling the truth, she melted against him and returned the kiss.

When he finally lifted his head, she swayed a little in his arms.

“Are you swooning?” he asked suspiciously. “Because if so, I want it noted on the record.”

Her lips curved into a huge smile. “I might be, actually. Kole, are you sure? About me?”

Her voice was breathless, full of hope.

He nodded. Then he took a big breath and summoned the strength to be honest. “I can’t say I’m not scared. You know how I felt when Harry died. Falling in love frightens me, because you might not return the feeling, and that leaves me vulnerable. But Annie told me carpe diem, and I know she’s right. You do have to seize the day. So here I am. Seizing.”

“You don’t have to worry,” Tasha whispered. “I do love you.”

His heart swelled. “Really?”

“Really. And Kole—there’s no rush. We don’t have to leap into anything. We don’t have to move in together all the time, or make any long term decisions. I’m just happy knowing there might be a future for us.”

He kissed her again. “Well, just so you know, when I was taking the photos in the church, all I could think about was standing in front of you, vowing to love you forever, and putting my ring on your finger to tell everyone you’re mine. I like the idea, Tasha. Just so you know.”
She looked up into his eyes, her own glimmering.

“‘Your eyes are lodestars,’” he said, brushing away a tear that fell onto her cheek.

“Is that from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*?”

“That’s right.”

“What does it mean?”

“Lodestars are stars that guide the course of a ship. And that’s how I feel.” He kissed her lips. “You’re guiding me home.”

More tears joined the first. “It warrants a joke about how your Bottom’s the best or something,” she whispered, wiping her face, “but I can’t be flippant.” She raised herself on tiptoes and flung her arms around his neck. “I’m so happy. I can’t believe it. I won you and the shop! I’m the luckiest girl alive.” She sobbed into his shoulder.

He chuckled and squeezed her tightly, resting a cheek on the top of her head. He raised his right hand to his sister, who gave him a thumbs up before returning to the restaurant with the others.

As he lowered his hand, his ring caught the sun and glinted. *Hey, Harry*, he said silently, tightening his arms around Tasha again. He still missed his brother, and always would. But it was time to look forward, to think of the future, and to put his trust in love.
A Sneak Peek at Treat her Right (#2)

Maisey’s head buzzed from a combination of the loud music, excitement, lack of food, and too much wine. She checked her watch—eleven forty-five. Only fifteen minutes to go until the New Year, but enough time to catch a breath of fresh air before the celebrations began.

Motioning to Elle that she was nipping out so the other girl could keep an eye on the till, she slipped through the couples turning slowly to the music in the semi-darkness and made her way outside. More people stood on the waterfront, some dancing, others standing around or sitting talking, most of them wearing the chocolate-colored sparkly party hats she’d made. She skirted them all and walked to the water’s edge, where the crescent moon lay reflected like a silver fish.

She took a deep breath, then let it out slowly. For the first time in two weeks, some of the tension began to ease from her shoulders. It had been a mad Christmas. As soon as she’d signed the lease for Treats, it had been all systems go to get the place up and running for New Year, which was crazy considering the whole of New Zealand went on holiday over most of December and January. But she and the girls knew they’d be mad to miss out on the tourist season, and they’d worked flat out every day except Christmas Day to get the shop open.

Today had been the first day, and in the evening they’d held a huge party to celebrate. Luckily, it had been a resounding success. She’d lost count of how many people had turned up, but it must have been several hundred. Friends of friends had come to show their support, and Fox had closed his restaurant for the night and paid all his staff to work for them, handing out drinks and serving canapés he’d made for them as a Christmas present. She must remember to give him a kiss later for that. Tasha almost certainly wouldn’t.

She smiled as she thought of her best friend, glad things had worked out for her. Kole, the idiot that he was, had nearly ruined everything by wanting to make the shop a surprise, but luckily Tasha hadn’t held it against him. The two of them had been ridiculously happy, and Kole was even talking about getting married, although Tasha was trying to get him to slow down. Maisey was pleased. Kole had certainly gone through hell when Harry died; he deserved some happiness.

A shooting star streamed across the black velvet sky, and Maisey caught her breath. “Hello, Harry,” she whispered. “I miss you.” Just saying the words hurt, and she swallowed hard.
His death had changed all his siblings irrevocably. Skye—fresh out of university—had fled the country, needing to escape from the place where she saw her brother around every corner, and she still came back only rarely, a shadow of the carefree girl she had once been. Kole had decided he’d never make the same mistake in getting angry over a broken heart, and it had taken Tasha to convince him he did deserve a happy ending.

And herself? Maisey wrapped her arms around her, shivering a little in the cool air. Although it was the height of summer, the breeze coming across the harbor lifted her hair and raised goose bumps on her arms.

She’d changed too. A bout of depression had floored her, and she’d struggled with it all the way through university. Toward the end, she’d changed pills and now it was less of a problem, although sometimes she could feel the black dog in the shadows, watching her, waiting to pounce. She could feel it now, which bothered her, because it had been a lovely day, and she was thrilled the party had been such a success. She was just tired, that was all. It had been a busy few weeks.

“Hey. You okay out here?”

She turned to see Kole’s best mate, Joss, standing there with a sandwich in one hand and two glasses of champagne in the other. She smiled. “Hey, you. Are those for me?”

He handed her the sandwich and one of the glasses. “You haven’t eaten all night. I thought you might be feeling a bit light-headed.”

“I was, actually.” She took a big bite of the sandwich, one of Fox’s lovely tuna ones with his homemade lemony mayonnaise, silently noting Joss’s observation that she hadn’t eaten. “Mmm. I needed that.” She washed it down with a swallow of the champagne and sighed. “Nice.”

“Congratulations on the party.” He looked back at the shop. “You’ve done superbly well, getting it ready in time.”

“We’ve all worked hard.” Her gaze, however, focused not on the shop but on him. Tall and dark, with lovely eyes the color of an evening sky, Joss Heaven was the very essence of scrumptiousness. Too bad he would never think of her as a possible partner, she thought wistfully. He’d only ever treated her like a sister, and anyway, Kole had warned all his mates the area around her was a DMZ, where none of them were allowed to tread. *Thanks, bro.*
Joss looked back at her and sipped his wine. Yes, she thought, she could quite easily have fallen for someone like the handsome doctor, who’d always had a hint of the bad boy about him, even though he was now considered a respectable pillar of society.

As she continued to stare at him, his lips gradually curved, and for a moment they just studied each other.

“Nearly midnight,” he said.
“Yes.”
A morepork hooted way off in the bush as if to mark the occasion.

He glanced at the shop again, then back at her, his eyes lit with the mischievousness she remembered from when they were all teenagers together. “So who are you going to kiss when the clock strikes?”

Heart thudding, Maisey gave a nonchalant shrug. “No special someone for me at the moment. Hasn’t been for a while.”

“That’s just a crime.” His gaze fixed on hers, and her heart sped up even more. Was he saying…he wanted to kiss her?

“It is,” she agreed. “I might cry.”
He chuckled. “Well, we can’t have that.”

In the shop, voices started counting down from ten, and those out on the waterfront echoed them. “Ten, nine, eight…”
Joss moved a bit closer.
“…six, five, four…”
She held her breath as he slipped a hand to cup her head.
“…two, one… Midnight!”

“Heart thudding, Maisey gave a nonchalant shrug. “No special someone for me at the moment. Hasn’t been for a while.”

“Happy New Year,” he murmured, and lowered his lips to hers.

Maisey closed her eyes and let him kiss her. His lips were warm and firm, and they moved across hers slowly, pressing soft kisses from one corner of her mouth to the other. She’d expected a brief touch of lips, a brotherly peck, but this had nothing to with sibling affection. He reached the right side of her mouth, moved back to the center, and then she felt the brush of his tongue on her bottom lip.

With a soft sigh, she opened her mouth to him and met his tongue with her own, enjoying the luxurious slide of it, the way it sent a tingle all the way through her.
His hand on the back of her head still didn’t release her, and Maisey gave a soft moan as he deepened the kiss, holding her tightly, refusing to let her go. All the hairs on her body rose, her nipples tightened, and her internal muscles clenched in a tiny pleasurable squeeze.

When he finally released her, she was breathless and trembling, completely bemused by his sudden display of passion.

He lowered his hand, and she blinked rapidly and moistened her lips, conscious they were only a foot or so away from the water’s edge and hoping she didn’t faint and fall in.

“Gosh,” she said, and swallowed.

Joss stared at her, then ran a hand through his hair. “I…um…” His lips curved. “Sorry about that.”

“No need to apologize.” That was the best kiss I’ve had in, like, ever.
“I got carried away,” he said. “Excitement of New Year and all that.”
She nodded, trying not to laugh. “Happy New Year, Dr. Heaven.”
He smiled. “Happy New Year, Maisey.” He held up his arm. “Back to the shop?”
“Sure.” She held his arm, her fingers tightening on the firm muscle, and they walked slowly back to Treats through the crowds of people dancing and singing.

No doubt he spoke the truth. They were all fairly drunk, excited about the opening of the shop, and emotions were always heightened on New Year’s Eve.

But later, when she eventually lay in bed looking up into the darkness, she would remember the way he’d held her, refusing to let her go as he kissed her, and it would be a long while before her eyes finally closed.

#

Read the rest of Maisey’s story in Treat her Right (Treats to Tempt You Book 2)
More by Serenity Woods

Newsletter
Sign up for my Newsletter and be the first to know when my books are released. You’ll also be able to download my Starter Library for FREE!

*

Other Books by Serenity Woods
For an up-to-date list of available books, please visit the Books page on my website.

Treats to Tempt You
Book 1: Treat with Caution
Book 2: Treat her Right
Book 3: A Rare Treat
Book 4: Trick or Treat
Book 5: A Festive Treat
Book 5.5: No Way to Treat a Lady (Novella)
Book 6.5: A Taste of Things to Come (Novella)

*

Between the Sheets
(follows on from the Treats series)
Book 1: A Secret Between Friends
Book 2: An Ocean Between Us
Books 3-5 coming soon

*

The Four Seasons
Book 1: Seducing Summer
Book 2: Tempting Autumn
Book 3: Bewitching Winter
Book 4: Persuading Spring

*

Three Wise Men
Book 1: The Perfect Gift
Book 2: An Ideal Present
Book 3: A Secret Parcel

*

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.

Website: http://www.serenitywoodsromance.com
Facebook: http://www.facebook.com/serenitywoodsromance
Twitter: https://twitter.com/Serenity_Woods