

November 2003: Megan tried desperately not to let anxiety dampen the excitement of her first overseas trip. She was 14 now. Other kids flew around the world. She could do it and not act nervous. Besides they were nearly there and she would be met by her parents. The thrill welled up in her. Now that she was grown she could fly from Wellington to Bangkok any time. She had parents; it was just that they worked overseas.

In the airport she followed the crowds. The baggage handling was just like domestic flights. She could do this. She waited for her matched leather case and backpack and smiled smugly at some of the battered packs that were lifted off the belt around her. She was someone. She had parents and nice luggage and travelled overseas to see them. Some of the other passengers were hugging the people who had come to meet them. Megan would do that soon. Her parents would push through the crowd eager to make up for the five years they had been in Thailand without her. The crowds began to thin and then fill out again as more planes arrived. Megan found a corner seat and pressed back into it, fighting tears and humiliation. But then she saw him. The man rushing across the airport lounge was her dad.

"Hello Megs. God what was that stupid woman thinking, putting you on a plane here. It's not as if we don't pay her a fortune. Don't worry Meg, there's a boarding school that has agreed to take you tonight and we'll have you back home at latest the day after tomorrow."

For years after, Megan struggled to understand why she answered, "Thank you daddy."

November 2008: Her working holiday in Sydney was fun, but tonight Megan was no longer enjoying herself. The crowd she had been with had drifted away, the band had been too loud for too long and the guy she had been dancing with, - Andrew she thought he had said his name was, - was deteriorating into a drunken slob. How did she never fail to pick the no-hopers? He followed her towards her table, his hand sliding up and down her back and across her backside. When the other hand began to caress a breast, Megan had had enough. She turned suddenly to take him by surprise and pushed him firmly away. He staggered drunkenly back.

Across the room a tall man pushed his way through the crowd. He placed a firm hand on Andrew's shoulder.

"Time to go home, sir, the lady's with me."

That was news to Megan and Andrew, who peered blearily up at the newcomer.

"Leave." The ice in the voice cut through into even Andrew's befuddled brain. He set off for the door.

"I'm hungry Miss Ambrel, and I hope you are too as I would consider it a pleasure to offer a complimentary meal from the hotel." Megan realised that she really was hungry and this new man was good looking, sober and polite and wore a name badge identifying him as Hugh Roland, manager. The fact that he knew her name was puzzling but when she asked he told her that it was his job to know everything, and she did after all work for the hotel complex even if it was only selling flowers. Megan accepted the free meal.

Monday March 2016

Megan was alone again. Megan understood being alone, that was how she had lived her life. There had always been people of course. Care givers, teachers, school friends. Groping boys for whom the ultimate prize was Megan Ambrel. If the stories were to be believed she had lost her virginity at least a hundred times before she was fifteen. Actually she hung on to it until a drunken party when she was seventeen, and then she had lost it to a slightly goofy shy boy who didn't boast. Megan surprised herself by thinking of him with affection and wondering where he was now. And then of course there had been Hugh. And Megan ruefully acknowledged to herself that she didn't know where he was either.

She ran a brush once more through her sparkling long blonde hair. She was ready for the world. She straightened her tasteful discrete and very expensive necklace. It wasn't crooked, but her life was a little straighter for the effort. She resisted the urge to linger any longer in front of the mirror. The world outside needed her. This was just another chapter of her life. She wasn't alone. She was needed and valued. There were currently fifty-five paying guests to care for, a staff who depended on her, and there was her friend and neighbour Eileen Hammond.

Outside, the sound of the sea and a crying seagull welcomed her. The sun had no warmth yet but the day had promise. Megan walked the short distance to the low part of the fence and glanced around for early walkers or guests, but there were none so she kicked two long and graceful legs up and over to drop into the next back yard.

She chuckled impishly to herself. The illicit thrill of being ungraceful while in charge of a multi-million dollar beach accommodation lodge easily equalled a night on the town. Life was good. She'd had difficult times before and always came out a little stronger than before. She would do that now.

Eileen Hammond would be home at this time of the morning, and at most other times too, Megan thought a little sadly. Eileen was slower than she had been as headmistress to over a thousand teenage girls, but she still had the power in her personality and the awareness of mind to be the woman who had controlled a staff of fifty as well as the students.

Megan pushed open the back door and grinned as she remembered Eileen's comment, "Who needs to lock a door when she lives next to the country's leading gangsters?" At the time Megan had been hurt and shocked but now she could laugh, if only a little sadly.

"Well just look at you. The lone and lovely business woman. Are you sure you'll be safe with me for a crack of dawn date over a cup of coffee?" Eileen chuckled.

"Beware the septuagenarian gay school ma'am," Megan laughed back. "Anyway. I just happen to have a reliable loving husband who has neglected to remember he has me for a little while, and as a punishment I am going out with an alternate date."

Eileen was too fond of Megan to take the raillery any further. But a man who says he cares deeply but may not be able to return for a long time, if at all, and then is unheard from for weeks did not suggest to her a loving future.

The two women took the more sedate route out to the road and into the inviting, neat drive leading to the office, restaurant and manager's accommodation at the Moho. Megan and Hugh had originally affectionately called it the MoHo because they couldn't decide whether it was really a Motel or Hotel. The name stuck, and when in July of 2016 the grand new Kapiti Coast Accommodation opened to general acclaim and awe, its registered name was the Moho.

Angela, arriving early at work as usual met the other two women. Greetings were exchanged, promises to get right on to preparing rooms and cabins for new guests were made, and most importantly there was an undertaking to find Tony and stir him into life for early breakfasts. Megan knew that Angela's life had become the Moho. Its successes were Angela's successes and she took any failure as a personal shortcoming. Megan wished she had more like Angela.

As Megan organised the day ahead, Eileen watched her friend for signs of the feelings she knew must be there, and although she was a master of reading the unsaid, she saw only an occasional glimpse that Megan felt her life was no longer an unbroken stream of playful adventures to be enjoyed and wallowed in.

A young man scurried into the restaurant and faltered when he saw Megan there. “Tony, the clock. What time is this?” Megan called.

Megan and Eileen exchanged a grin as the irrepressible Tony disappeared into the kitchen.

Mac was army at heart. He had lived the SAS life as a young man until he found a niche in computer security. The thrill of searching and probing amongst unknown software and concealed files had caught him the way physical attack and jumping from planes had previously appealed to him. Once the computer bug had him in its grip he had moved into intelligence and code cracking. By the time he was 28 he had pined for the riches that his newly discovered skills opened to him and he rejoined civilian life and a bank. Within a month the manager had him in his office deploring his methods. Mac tried to explain that it was much quicker to check out a customer's credentials by simply looking at all their personal files, both up-front and secret, but the bank was adamant that a veneer of legality had to cover their security department. There was a solution, and management was quick to point it out. As a private investigator he could charge more and the bank was not responsible for any dubious techniques. And so with generous start-up money from his former employer, Mac set up shop doing the same job he had done the week before for twice the money. And now, rather too early to be comfortable he gave his tie one last jerk and started for the door.

Eileen peered at Megan through her steaming coffee and waited. Megan, preoccupied with the food orders looked up and caught her eye and smiled at the steady look.

“What yourself, Meg, it's time you learned to talk about your private life, and if not to me then who?”

Eileen, obliged by smiling softly but reached across the table and rested her hand lightly on Megan's. "You're a busy woman Meg. You're hurting and you're a little afraid. And you're rather alone. I may not be able to do much, but I'm here and I listen. Spill it."

“Nuthin new miss. Lost me hubby. That’s all.” Her voice faded as she continued to meet Eileen’s now steely gaze.

“Megs, the reminiscences of old busybodies are painful to the senses but you remind me of a brat of almost 30 years ago. I had to listen for almost an hour while she assured me there was nothing to tell, but that was nothing to the almost three hours I had to endure once she started talking, while she wept and sobbed and poured out a tale of crime, immorality and violence that was her daily life at home. Save me the first hour. Just tell me how you feel.”

Megan smiled back at her. This was the older woman she had not had in her life. There was a strong bond of caring and love here but still the words did not easily come.

Eileen understood that under the bravado this would not be an easy conversation for Megan. Megan did not do failure well, and although the details in Eileen's mind were sketchy she suspected that the odd occasional meetings that constituted the Roland marriage were drawing to a close. Megan had let slip enough times that if Hugh were any more invisible, then he might as well not be there at all. And Eileen had the feeling that although Megan would fight for her marriage, she would not be much dismayed by the prospect of losing Hugh.

“OK, I met him, we set up shop together, had a good time, decided that the Australian operation was going well and in good hands so we came here. One day he said he might not be back for a long time. I said I'd give him three weeks.” Megan realised with dismay that her resentment was real and uncontrollably bubbling up inside her. To prevent it becoming self pity it became temper - at herself, at Eileen and at the world. “All three of us know I was lying. I'll give him forever, and here I am running a large business with my husband and financial backer gone, and you know all this and I have to get to work.” She stood suddenly attempting to escape into work.

“Now you're angry. That's an emotion that's good to start with.”

Megan turned sharply back towards Eileen, “Oh, I've had plenty of emotions. That wasn't the start.”

“You expressed it to me. That's important.”

Megan dropped back into her seat. “So I get angry with the only friend I have left in the world. That will make things better?”

“Oh Megan, remember who you're talking to. How many good friends do you think I made from youngsters who had screamed abuse at me hours before? You and I didn't get off to such a good start if you remember.”

“I know that, but honestly I can't take it out on you, and anyway if I ever admit I'm frightened and alone, I'm defeated. As things are I'll find a way through.”

“You just did admit you're frightened and alone, and you're fighting back. But I need to know for myself, can you make ends meet?”

Megan nodded unconvincingly. “The income meets the debts and daily expenses, but Hugh and I had agreed we'd need more money invested over the next two or three years to get properly afloat. We mortgaged to the hilt and the banks won't risk more. As soon as I meet extra expenses I run the risk of getting behind and if I can't run as I am then there is no way back from running with increased debt.” Megan was glad to be talking about real problems. She didn't know if she could win, but this at least was a battle she could fight.

Eileen noted the calm good sense of her analysis. “How much, do you need for the extra debt?”

Megan shrugged. Her eyes had taken a distant look as she worked again over invisible and uncertain numbers. “That's the point. It's emergencies – contingency money – Hugh has plenty of backing so we didn't borrow for extras, we just worked to get afloat.” She chuckled at the allusion.

“And now without the extra, as soon I have a setback, for example if we have storm damage or low guest numbers - we sink – slowly and gracefully.”

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Megan at last caught the casual tone and saw its significance. “Oh no you don't. I know your type, you catch a girl when she's down and strapped for cash and take a controlling share for a pittance, foreclose the mortgage and put her out in the street.” Her laughing eyes gazed into Eileen's steady ones.

Eileen slowly relaxed into a smile, across a generation – almost two - she learned anew that she

loved this feisty, beautiful and rather alarming young woman, and warmed to see her relax as she talked of her problems. "That was very bad taste, Megan."

"Yes, wasn't it? A minimum of \$50,000 a year for three years. Much too much for you so forget it." Eileen thought a little smugly of her investments, but said no more.

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Mac had no trouble finding the group in the empty room and greeted the two bankers he knew. The third man was a detective from the fraud squad. Mac's unasked question was answered by Scott Patterson, CEO, of *All Australasian*. The meeting was a meeting of amnesiacs who would not be able to recall what he did or how, and what his instructions were to be. Mac accepted that with a nod.

A short time before, Mac had been asked to investigate the financial dealings of a Hugh Roland. Mr Roland had brought his New Zealand born wife back from Australia and proceeded to buy accommodation. Mac's job was superficial, given the amounts of money, but he was asked to confirm that the accounts were valid and the Australian property was legitimate. They were, and the job was done inside half a day. Now there were problems.

Mac gazed at Scott in amazement. "He mortgaged for a hotel that he didn't own by using a non-existent lawyer?"

"Twice," said Scott. "And the third one was the standard scam of over inflating the price; only that time he invented a licensed valuer to give the valuation. As you recall we did a standard check on him at the time. And for that matter we did a non-standard check using you because the amounts were so large, but we were looking in the wrong place. His existing accounts and properties were fine. It was the properties he was buying that were a fraud. Yes, you don't need to tell us that you warned us that something was not quite right and we should extend the investigation."

Mac was grateful that he didn't need to blow his own trumpet, or defend his recommendations.

"So we can't call the funds in, because there is nothing to back them. Not in New Zealand anyway, and the Australian branches are not going to stump up money from what for them is a worthy customer, so what we need is to look deeper still. Why did a rich man do it? Where is the money for the property he didn't buy? Where does the wife fit in? Most ominously of all, what does he owe to Mr Sum?"

The name hung heavily over the table for a time. Mac knew the significance of Mr Sum. He was, quite simply, the very organised crime part of the otherwise worthy Asian Bank of Won Sum.

Legitimate customers banked with Won Sum and nefarious activities went under Mr Sum's name.

"Oh, come on gentlemen, he's not in New Zealand. And it's all over for him in Australia," said Mac attempting to dismiss this as paranoia.

"We hope that remains true, but someone with fairly good knowledge of what our Hugh is up to approached a bank manager in Napier and suggested that if the bank was successful in recovering money from him that Mr Sum would not be pleased and had first call on the funds. Fortunately our small branch manager had no idea what he was talking about and got in touch with Head Office and gave us a detailed run down of what was claimed to be going on just as we were beginning to learn of it ourselves."

Mac was grateful that a waitress handed him the cup of early morning coffee he craved, so that he could sit back and contemplate what he was hearing. An Australian entrepreneur had come to the country, borrowed large amounts of money for three hotels that he could never own and had not paid for and then got more money from one of Asia's most alarming banks. The price of defaulting on Mr Sum's loans was often death. The price of outright fraud was something not to think about. The visit in Napier however didn't ring true. Mr Sum does not send minor players to explain to minor bank managers his difficulties. Mr Sum worked either in the CEO's office or in back alleys.

The waitress left and the detective leant forward and came bluntly to the point. "There are several aspects of this that suit your skills. You can operate closer to the edge of the law than we can. You

have computer and interrogative skills, and I gather you are not too hampered with the privacy laws.” He smiled gently. “With the backing of the banks, who have a huge investment here, you will have more resource than we can initially throw at this until the nature of the crime is clearer. But most of all we want someone with your background who can observe and if necessary, protect the wife.” He sat back and added into the momentary quiet, “I gather she's worth observing.”

Mac raised his eyebrows in question and waited.

“She's a looker, but that's beside the point. She is probably in great danger. Hugh is clever and has almost certainly gone to ground. The wife runs a hotel up the coast a bit and is very visible. Regardless of whether she is involved herself, or not, the boys from Sum's will be interested in her and she makes a handy hostage. If Sum is not after her, then we want to know why. Even if she is safe and uninvolved, which doesn't seem very likely, we want Hugh, and he is bound to try to make contact with her. If nothing else, keep her alive. These people are not nice people.”

A contemplative silence settled over the group.

Mac at last smiled broadly. “Am I understanding correctly that you are asking me to shift my office to a holiday resort at your expense so that I can observe a beautiful woman? Gentlemen, I think in the interests of public duty, respect for the law and the protection of the delicate fairer sex, I accept.”

“Thanks Mac, we knew we could rely on you, but if you refer to Mrs Roland as the delicate fairer sex within earshot of her, be prepared to be eaten raw for breakfast and your bones spat out for the seagulls. She graduated from flower girl to company administrator for a chain of hotel's in a few short years. And since the Rolands came to New Zealand, she has administered almost single handedly one of the most successful accommodation units in the country. And remember she got her training and worked hand in hand with a man capable of defrauding New Zealand banks of tens of millions of dollars while still partly running an Australian hotel chain.”

Mac loved New Zealand himself, but it didn't seem a big enough fish for people like this. “Why did they come to New Zealand when they have all that in Os?”

“Finding that out is part of your job. Perhaps there were opportunities here that we don't know about. Perhaps they are escaping pranks already played in Australia. Perhaps the New Zealand wife wanted to come home. As you know we didn't find anything wrong in Australia so it's probably the first or the last and maybe both. We just have to look harder.”

Mac received the formal instructions and payments he needed. The other men knew that despite the light hearted way he prepared to go to see Mrs Roland and her beach side accommodation, that there was no need to remind Mac that this was no holiday.

Although Mac felt pretty good when he strode back into his office, the apprehension of the morning was returning. He had been chosen by some top brains to do a job they doubted they could do without him. This was a chance to unscramble the workings of a major criminal, attack organised crime and protect a possibly innocent citizen. It was also an opportunity to be outmanoeuvred, humiliated and end up with a dead body, possibly his own. He reminded himself that a man could only do his best, and that was the standard that Mac set for himself. He dropped a friendly kiss onto the top of his receptionist's hair. “My favourite and only employee, you are going to be in charge while I cavort in holiday bliss caring for a beautiful woman.”

Wendy smiled happily up from her desk. “At last we have removed the deadwood from the office.” Mac dropped another playful kiss into her hair, and pulled up a chair beside her. “I haven't much time. I'll leave the documents for you to read and fax to the Moho – what sort of a name is that – but basically we have a successful Australian businessman, probably with very little spare cash even if the family is worth hundreds of millions, who came to New Zealand, talked the banks into giving him a fortune to buy more hotels here and then neglected to actually pay for them. He then disappeared after also getting a great deal of money from Mr Sum.” Mac was relieved to see Wendy stiffen at the name. He wouldn't have to explain the business practices of Mr Sum to her. “Payments

for all of which are now well overdue and there is no security because he doesn't own anything in New Zealand. Our job is to get back as much of the money that we can and keep everyone alive while we do it.”

Mac and Wendy, shared an unspoken moment of celebration. Lanell Financial Investigations had hit the big-time. This was not some petty suburban muddle, such as they had dealt with in the past. This was big money involving some very angry and important bankers.

Mac moved quickly. His army training and his natural instinct to get on and be there doing something, drove him. If Mrs Roland needed protection then he needed to be there to provide it. And if she was part of a multi-million dollar conspiracy then he needed to be close to observe and learn, but he would not be unprepared. He packed thoroughly and carefully, made arrangements, left affairs in Wendy's hands and set off on what was little more than a 60 kilometre drive to the coast, north of Wellington. As he drove he allowed himself a childish delight. Despite a career involving international travel, he had seldom stayed in luxurious or even particularly comfortable accommodation. Now with employers eager to see he stayed put he would damn well enjoy himself, even if he had to deal with Mr Sum's henchmen while he did it. And so in a buoyant mood he parked in front of Kapiti's Moho and began to check out the territory.

Megan gave the afternoon's instructions and started back home. She had long since realised that she could not be on hand 24/7. She had learned to trust the staff she employed to carry on when she wasn't there. They seldom let her down and the imposed relaxation she got from just walking away was worth it a hundred times over in added efficiency. Who wanted a crabby manager if they could have a friendly subordinate?

Megan made a cup of coffee and relaxed, feet up, looking back towards the hotel. After all just looking wasn't working was it? And she could keep an eye on things without stressing. No one believed this was really necessary or even helpful except Megan in her more dishonest moments, but in fact she relaxed better if she was in touch, and Megan liked to be in touch. And being in touch mattered now as a stranger came around the back of the building. With a quiet oath, Megan scrambled up, still clutching her cooling coffee and headed out the door.

“Sir, the public entrance is back up the drive at the front corner of the building,” Megan fixed her welcoming smile on her face to lessen any implied criticism. Following the prominent sign that pointed to reception was no challenge for most guests, but there were always idiots.

Mac had been prepared to be confronted by zealous underlings as he checked out the back of the hotel and the manager's residence, before registering, But he had not dared to hope to meet Megan Roland so soon.

And god, thought Mac, this tall blond had to be her, although the formal photograph he had seen did not do her justice. The welcoming smile was no longer quite as warm as it had been, and Mac realised he was standing frozen, staring intently at the woman before him. No wonder everyone who met her prefixed any comments with “she's a beauty”. Mac struggled for a moment to regain his professionalism and remember his prepared explanations.

“Yes, I saw the entrance, but I do so like to get a feel for a place before I stay and I wanted to look around quickly before I settle in.” Mac took a chance on overdoing things and stepped forward, hand outstretched. “You must be Mrs Roland, the manager.” Mac silently congratulated himself for not adding any inane comments to the end of that speech. Megan took his hand briefly and Mac was conscious of a quickly concealed tension that he couldn't decipher. Mac was always alert to first reactions, both his own and the people he met. His own so that he could suppress any foolish emotional outbreaks, and the other person's to find out weaknesses and strengths. That was his job. Mrs Roland had felt something she couldn't quite conceal, but Mac wasn't sure if it was, irritation, recognition, anger, or even fear or desire.

Megan offered to walk him back to reception. The offer was immediately refused, and the refusal equally quickly dismissed. Megan would keep an eye on her new guest. Mac had the uneasy feeling he had begun badly. Mrs Roland couldn't possibly be on to him but he was feeling wrong footed. Still, there are many wars won after lost battles and Mac would keep his lovely hostess safe, long enough to arrange for her imprisonment if that's what she deserved. Mac struggled to suppress the professionally unworthy hope that she would turn out to be both innocent and a widow, but accepted that given the cunning and influence of Mr Hugh Roland, neither was very likely.

Although Mac couldn't penetrate them, Megan's thoughts were similar to his own. Megan was grappling with what she was feeling. This was not her ordinary guest. She was perfectly used to admiring gazes and the prolonged moment of appraisal and raised eyebrows she had received would have surprised her more if it had been absent, but there was something else. As Hugh's wife, she had met enough tough purposeful men to recognise someone on a mission. She could easily discourage an admirer, after all to the world she was a happily married woman, but she wanted to find out, and quickly, why this single man with a rather over eager ingratiating smile wanted to stay at her hotel.

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Hemi Mahima was puzzled. "Joe, I have only been in the company a year. I am not completely trained. And the older men will hate it if I go off for a week to some fancy place to fix their mistakes."

Joe sighed quietly. "Anyone else on the staff would be on their way by now. You I have to flatter. You are good enough for this. You are trustworthy and you are diplomatic. You have no family ties to prevent you being away a week. We built the Moho – what sort of a name is that? - we did it well but we had a contract to repair any defects that occurred inside a year. A number of small leaks showed up on the landward side of the external cabins, and now 15 months on we are more than due to turn up and do something. You can do it. I do not make mistakes picking staff for jobs. So why are you still in my office?"

"Mostly so you could have a chance to tell me how good I am," Hemi gave a slightly camp theatrical flourish.

"Really I chose you because, no one will marry you and you have no friends, so you are free to go away for a week," Joe added irritably and insincerely.

"Well thank you so much. Now I feel fully motivated to further the aims of the company."

Joe became suddenly serious and pointed to a chair by his desk. "Actually, sit down a moment. There is something I do need to say, and if you refuse to go I will understand and you still have a job."

Joe waited while Hemi dropped into the seat.

"When we built that place we were well paid and supported, it was a big job and it went well. The wife, what was her name?" Joe pulled a piece of paper towards him, "Oh M. Roland, Mary, Margaret or something. Quite an eyeful she is. Anyway she was in charge and pretty clued up. She knew what she wanted alright, and the boys all worked extra hard to keep her happy. They were all having wet dreams over her and if she asked them to fly they flapped their arms. No problems until Mr Roland – Harry, no Hugh - found a small problem with a separating wall and very politely told us to fix it. I explained that the cost was too great and it would hold ok. Anyway he got a little irritated, and frankly Hemi, it wasn't nice. The guy knew the law and all his rights, and made it quite clear to me that I did as he and his wife – Megan, that's it. She's Megan. She's ok. Anyway if we did as they said, we would still be in business at the end of it. We repaired the wall. We got paid, we left, we got good recommendations and further opportunities for other work that was all pretty lucrative. What I'm saying to you Hemi is that I want you because you can cope with people. Don't mess with the Rolands. They pay and they're fair, but they know what to do with people who mess

them up. Got it?"

"I shall charm the pants off them, Joe."

"Charm the pants off Mrs Roland, and we can all give up eating fish, because it will have been dining off your disgusting carcass dressed in concrete boots."

Hemi went out to load the van with a powerful feeling that this was more than a job. This was a life changing adventure.

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Mac followed Megan up the stairs. She had dropped into her guest welcoming persona that he had to admit she did well. He was welcomed to the Moho. The name was explained to him. His request for unlimited wifi was accepted and priced. Various sightseeing spots and places to eat, costs and options all flowed. Once he caught Megan's eye as she read the welcoming literature and something passed between them that could have been, "we both know that this is not for you," but the moment passed. Mac was offered a cabin some little way off and refused. He was offered the large family unit overlooking the sea – only a bit more expensive, and since the summer season was drawing to a close: available – but again refused. The small corner room overlooking the manager's external accommodation was not usually let while other rooms were vacant, but that would be fine for a single man who would mostly be working.

Megan sighed inwardly. She had been outmanoeuvred. She longed to say that she did not want guests, and particularity this guest looking out over her home, but did it really matter? If he wanted to keep an eye on her then she needed to keep an eye on him.

"Here's the room you asked for," she smiled brightly. "Not our best by any means, but if you want small and quiet, it should do you well."

Mac saw with satisfaction that from here he could observe and protect. He had an uneasy feeling that he might as well announce to the world that he was here to watch and probably imprison his exquisite host. She seemed to be a step ahead of him. He heard the sarcasm as she pointed down to the external unit that served as her home and said, "as you know, that's where I live. I shall be keeping an eye on you." From any other woman it would have been a flirt. From Megan Roland it was a warning.

Mac had to keep the cleaners out. He didn't want to be so obvious, but there was no simple way to say it. "Mrs Roland, I will be working in this room. I work in bank security and hold confidential papers and I will be using a range of computer equipment. I do not want your service staff to come in. I have confidence in their integrity, but my work requires a level of confidentiality that I cannot guarantee in a public room, so please do not have this room serviced while I'm here. I will bring out any cleaning that needs to be done." Megan eyed Mac coldly. Bank security hung silently between them. Mac looked back smiling and relaxed. He could only brazen it out. He was paying a generous tab. If he wanted privacy he had only to ask. Meanwhile Megan remembered her host role.

"Certainly sir, if you are prepared to take care of your own room that is very generous."

She turned away, the smile still fixed to her face. "Will you be eating in the restaurant this evening? We have a very good cook, and you will enjoy meeting the guests."

Megan's welcoming persona was close to exhausted as she confirmed that he would indeed be dining in. She wished him a happy stay and hurried across to Eileen's house.

Eileen responded to the knock at once. She could move remarkably quickly for a woman her age. She listened to the story with increasing puzzlement. "But Meg, you have single businessmen staying all the time and even if he is in bank security he hardly needs to take a room above you to check your financial status."

"Ok, I'm a paranoid possibly newly single woman. I hope you're right, but indulge me here. I've met enough rogues and toughs and investigators to recognise one. A Mr Lanell does not take a corner room away from the sea and offer to do his own cleaning unless he's on the job. And I think I may be the job."

to conceal that he was privately employed in bank security. It was on his business card and the simplest of searches of his name would reveal that information. He knew that if a fraction of the suspicions that the banking world had of Megan Roland were true she would have checked him out by now, and be wondering if it was coincidence or not that she had an investigating officer staying so near her. Hopefully she would never find out about his SAS background, and the rest of his surveillance skills.

Mac was startled when Mrs Roland returned not only with the two drinks she had promised for her guests, but with a third for herself. Mac had to resist a desire to just settle back and enjoy the company of two fascinating and intelligent woman. But he had to stay alert. He was here sitting next to the very woman he had been sent to watch, protect and study, and with this Eileen Hammond person who appeared to be her close confidante and friend. Things were going very well, even if it was nothing more than a conspiracy by the two women to keep an eye on him.

“You're looking very satisfied with yourself Mr Lanell,” said Eileen smiling gently. She could not yet see any sign of the threat Megan had worried about. Mr Lanell was somewhat above average height, unusually muscular, rather ruggedly good looking, but otherwise had the slightly gormless manner that many men adopted around Megan. Still, if he posed a threat to Megan, he would not announce it, so she waited.

Mac smiled back and confessed that he had not expected to feel so relaxed and have such fascinating company on his first evening. He knew that they would need to get more about his job and purpose out of him anyway, so he ran on trying to sound ingenuously open, but suspecting that they would not be fooled. He was a single man with a business that required only a computer and the internet and so when the mood took him to have a week or two out of the office he decided to go. To be able to walk to the beach at any time to refresh his brain. To see and talk to different people. That was what a hard working man needed. It crossed his mind that talking solely to Eileen as he was, was drawing just as much attention to his real interest in Mrs Roland as if he talked solely to her. He turned towards her to include her in the conversation. It was a mistake. He took her unaware. With the attention off of her she had relaxed and was resting the side of her head on her hand intently studying him. He found himself uncomfortably close to her gazing into those startling huge cobalt blue eyes, framed with glowing creamy-tanned skin that cosmetic companies would die for. The light behind her was shining through the ends of the long blond hair that seemed like a trademark, picking it out as a golden halo. Neither Megan nor Mac wanted to be seen nervously leaping back so the moment held and for a second or two their eyes lingered, running through a range of emotions from awareness of each other and then to disquiet and embarrassment.

Gently they broke eye contact and swayed back a little.

Mac fought to calm himself and wondered what Eileen would make of the moment. The old bat was too bright to have missed that second of locked eye contact when they were too involved to smile or carry on the conversation. He had the feeling that it had thrown Megan as much as himself. An opportunity had arisen and he couldn't waste it.

“You know, Mrs Roland we have a little in common, because when the Moho was being built I had a brief job checking the Australian holdings of your husband on behalf of your bank.” Mac smiled almost simple mindedly. “I don't think I breach any customer confidentiality by saying there was no problem there.” He made a gesture of looking around the room as if he might see Hugh sitting at another table and then cringed inwardly for being overly theatrical. “Is he here?”

“He's away a lot on business.” Megan contributed after a short pause. She wanted to add, “and probably won't be coming back as I think you damn well know.” And was then startled by the sense of freedom that overcame her as she contemplated again, that that may be true.

But she had to watch every word she said to every stranger until she knew where she stood with

them, and with Hugh, and so with relief Megan excused herself to get up to meet Hemi Mahima as he came back in with Jenny. There was no need for the manager to welcome guests, and particularly not non-paying guests, to the restaurant, but she wanted to get away. Eileen could keep an eye on Lanell, and Megan felt she was too close to dropping her guard and giving away too much of herself. She had to run the Moho while Lanell had only to look out his window.

As she left a devilish streak in her made her turn back to the table. "Eileen, could I bring Mr Mahima my builder over to be introduced to someone? He's a bit of a goof-ball as far as I can see and I have rather had my fill of goof-ball male guests this afternoon." It was a very cheap shot and so very unworthy of a hotel manager. But what the hell thought Megan as she crossed the dining room. She wasn't getting as much fun as she should lately and these two had to stay whether she treated them right or not. Or at least Mahima did, and she was pretty sure that the creepy one wouldn't go anywhere soon.

"She likes you," Eileen smiled as Mac followed her with his eyes.

"How does she treat people she doesn't like?" Mac asked in genuine wonder.

"Politely," Eileen said straight faced. "She must have a soft spot for her large Maori, too," Eileen chuckled nodding across the room to where Megan was advancing on Mr Mahima who appeared to be falling back in front of her. "Mac. May I call you Mac? What do you want from Megan? I care about her. Life hasn't been very easy for her. Luxurious, yes, but not easy and she mustn't be hurt unnecessarily."

Mac looked at this kindly old woman and appreciated her strength and directness, but this was not the time to blow his cover. "I'm not a thug," he said ambiguously.

"But you will let her suffer if necessary?"

"She has to take responsibility for anything she has done." Mac responded, trapped into confessing far more than he wanted about his investigator's interest in Megan, but still unable to explain that he represented the law and that if Megan had been a conspirator with her husband she could expect major repercussions, but that if she made a run for it as Hugh had apparently done that she would be in even greater danger from the criminal fringe.

Mac shuddered to think what his employers would make of it if they knew that within two hours of arriving Mrs Roland and her neighbour had him tumbled as an investigator and were checking him out the way he was supposed to be checking her.

Megan switched back into her friendly hotel manager mode to introduce Hemi to Eileen. This would all help to keep Lanell occupied and under observation from people she felt she could rely on. Mahima was easy to control. She made sure she was close to him when she said, "I have to be up early tomorrow, so you guys have fun and I'm off to bed." She left the men to pick up the chair that Hemi had backed into.

Mac enjoyed the meal and the company, but he was quick about it and brusque with his good nights. He had to do better than sit and chat while Megan Rowland was unprotected at the far end of the drive. Although what he could do until he had some equipment in place he couldn't see. Back at his room he checked his door for signs of entry but the sliver of tape was where he had left it in the door crack. He checked emails, but they were only routine; as were the emails in and out of the Moho office below him. When he knew where he stood with Megan Rowland he would tell her never to write an administrator password near a computer, even if you tape it facing towards the wall. And a password must never be your husband's name, even twice and backwards. He felt a touch of affection for a criminal's wife who could be so naïve, and then remembered that all he had were the booking emails for the hotel and she was probably at this moment sending coded messages to Hugh asking him to check up on the investigating officer occupying one of her rooms.

Mac stopped daydreaming and got down to the serious work of setting up proper monitoring equipment to check on all guests and electronics in the Moho.

Working on into the night Mac found jobs and identities for most of the guests. Mr Mahima was

Bert, holding Wendy by the hair felt her body go limp. He tipped her head back and pulled up an eyelid and swore gently. She'd come round. He checked the filing cabinet and took a folder labelled *Roland* and started a search for Roland on Wendy's computer. A voice called from down the stairs, asking if Wendy wanted anything bought across the street. There was a pause and then the voice called again a little closer. Bert pressed himself against the wall by the door. There were footsteps on the stairs. Bert knew when to quit. Sometimes the cards fell wrong and you had to fold. As the second damn fool woman dashed passed him shouting, "Wendy what happened?" the way damn fool women do, he stepped around the door frame and left quickly. Before he hit the street he took off his balaclava and gloves. After a while he heard a siren. The pigs had arrived.

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Megan was grateful for another pleasant day. Keeping the guests busy and happy was so much easier in sunny weather. The staff was at work and getting things done. Three new sets of guests arrived suggesting that the end of season slowdown would be less dramatic than she had feared. She had a group of manufacturers booked for next week and orchardists the week after that. Next month she would drop to winter rates and try to pull in the bigger groups to get her through. She could do it she told herself. Jenny had distinguished herself by announcing that the big man from last night was pulling the back off his cabin and Mrs Roland had better get up there to make him stop. God, they had been preparing to empty the cabins for repairs all the time Jenny had been with them, did nothing ever penetrate? Lanell had been hanging around too closely, but she had come to expect that.

When the reception phone rang for Mr Mac Lanell, Megan was tempted to remind him that guests could be reached on their room phones or messages left, but since Mac was sitting in front of her in the restaurant she called him over. Anyway it was an opportunity too good to miss. There would be a price for expecting to use her office phone. She found some jobs to occupy her in the small area nearby. If Lanell could take too much interest in her, then she could listen to his conversations, and this one was interesting. Something was clearly wrong.

Mac hung on to the phone in disbelief. No one could be so stupid as to imagine that Wendy would have any information that was worth beating out of her. But then perhaps no one could be so stupid as to leave someone like Wendy in charge of a criminal investigation office. His constant requests for information about how badly she was hurt and why she didn't come to the phone, were getting plenty of attention from the damn Roland woman, but very little from the mindless police constable who kept trying to calm him with platitudes. At last Wendy's voice came on the line. She sounded brittle and a little weepy but not too bad. She had to have someone with her to monitor her for concussion but she was out and about. To Mac's insistence that she be brought out to the coast by the police or that he go and get her, she laughed. But they did agree that she wasn't now safe at the office or at home. She would come to the Moho. Once the police and medics released her she could do that in a train inside an hour. Mac smiled with relief as the ebullience of the Wendy he knew and cared for began to come through.

Megan who had listened to Mac's frantic requests for information about this Wendy person, had taken a distinct dislike to the woman. It didn't require much imagination to see what Lanell was really concerned about. After all, most obnoxious men had affairs with their receptionists. That's how a certain type of employee stayed employed. Megan grimly accepted that she was going to be host to both halves of Lanell Investigations. Why should she care? Another nagging voice inside her told Megan that she was being quite unfair. The poor woman had been attacked on reception. Something that haunted every business person dealing with the public. Still, this Wendy person had the creep to kiss her better. Megan was really at a loss to know why she was bothering to listen. She had a Moho to run and somewhere there was a large man knocking pieces off of it and needing instructions. Megan went to find Hemi.

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Mac hurried upstairs, checked his door for interference and picked up his tool kit. It wasn't a very big toolkit. If he was queried about it, he could brazen it out. Sometimes a man needs tools, even in a holiday resort. There was no one in the drive so he approached Megan's home quickly and knocked. If someone answered he could find an excuse to be there. No one did, and so he set to work. He knew the alarm type from his reconnoitre the day before. It was simple but time consuming. He released the front plates, disabled the alarm and added a radio controlled remote switch. He could have simply destroyed it or turned it off, but leaving Mrs Roland without an alarm was not what he wanted just now. The job done and the plates back up, there was someone at the far end of the drive. He pressed himself against the wall and hoped that he looked enough like the pots and paraphernalia hanging in the porch to escape a casual inspection. After a minute of farewells, some guests went into the office and a car drove off.

Mac struggled only briefly with the door lock, and hurried inside. He guessed that Hemi was efficient and Megan would be happy with what he was doing and judging by the big man's social skills of yesterday, when dealing with Megan, she would be on her way back very soon. Mac hoped she would find a need to check out the cleaning and ground care while she was at the far end of the property.

Inside was remarkably neat and uncluttered. He had picked Megan as more ornate than this, although the feminine touches were there and it was scrupulously clean. A 14 hour a day job every day hadn't prevented home care.

While these thoughts were going through Mac's head he had found a suitable spot inside the rim of the lounge light, got a kitchen stool was now attaching with tape a small but very effective listening device. A fine film of grease and dust around the rim showed him that even the immaculate Mrs Roland didn't clean here very frequently and it should be safe for a while. The Kitchen offered a second spot on top of a cupboard concealed by the fascia. The bedroom and bathroom could only be accessed through the lounge area and were almost certainly within sound of them. Mac did a quick check of the whole house. It was not large. Little more than a compact motel really. Mac checked windows and doors and how each was secured. Confident that he had done what he could, he left cautiously through the front door. He flicked the alarm on remotely and braced himself for the wail of sirens, but none came. He wished he could go back in and confirm that the alarms still worked correctly but that would give it away. He had left Mrs Roland unattended too long. He went to find her.

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Hemi was enjoying himself. He had had a pleasant night by himself by the sea and since he had only this job to concern him and no morning travelling to get to work, he already had the first cabin mostly done. The design was modular. Once he had the wall released it came away and revealed the problem. The builder's lining had gone far enough up the inside wall to stop rain water, but not if it was being blown upwards by the sort of winds, common in this area. He put a second layer at the top, rolled towards the outside to catch water travelling upwards. Just as he was preparing to reattach the back wall Megan Roland came to check on him. He could see why the rest of the crew thought she was a looker, but for Hemi she was too thin and pale, and lacked a casual manner that he found more attractive. But even Hemi had to agree that when she smiled or laughed, which wasn't quite often enough, she lit up the world. What did delight him was that she understood exactly what he was doing and took an interest when he showed where the water had gone over the top of the previous lining. She said she had asked at the time whether a second layer was needed and had been told that it wasn't. That was about a month before the first small water stain showed

up inside.

Yes Hemi was pleased. The boss had said that a major part of his job was customer satisfaction and although the Roland woman was not very fulsome in her praise, she was clearly impressed. And she didn't carry on that damn flirting. When they had touched it was because they were both peering into a corner to see the stain where water had sat for most of the last year. Perhaps her husband was due home. Mac Lanell also arrived just in time to help hold a section of the rear wall to reattach it.

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Wendy was still with the police and nurse and it would be over two hours before she could arrive. Mac made a point of asking Megan where to walk to on the beach to consume the time. For good measure he called across to a group of guests sipping drinks on the deck that he would be back in little more than an hour and set off across the back lawn to the beach. Beyond the beach wall he walked slowly to the next hedge forced himself to count slowly to one hundred then hurried back along a side hedge, through a gap, across the lawn past the same group of mildly puzzled guests, into the restaurant and up the stairs at a run.

His door was shut and locked.

He nearly returned to the beach, pretending to have collected something, to cover his embarrassment, but then he saw that the sliver of tape in the door crack was gone. He unlocked the door as quickly and quietly as he could and threw it open. He had to admire Mrs Roland's aplomb. Although his cases were askew and the lid not properly closed on one she was busy straightening a curtain, a look of theatrical surprise on her face at the door bursting open behind her.

"I asked that my room not be disturbed, Mrs Roland," Mac snapped, although part of him wanted to applaud the study of surprised innocence on Megan's face.

"I thought it was cleaners you didn't want in the room, Mr Lanell."

"You thought that I was quite happy to have people sorting through my confidential papers and equipment as long as they didn't clean them while they were about it?"

Megan knew that she should feel herself to be a fool. That she had been caught out by this creepy man snooping in his property and that now he was laughing at her. She should be so damn mad and embarrassed, but she really wanted just to laugh with him. The whole charade was so absurd.

She tried a different approach. "I have to run this accommodation for all of my guests, Mr Lanell. I need to know what is going on. I consider you a risky and unusual customer and for the safety of all of us I reserve the right to be aware. If that discomfits you, you are free to leave. I shall return your tariff."

As she spoke Megan crossed the room. Mac had the bizarre feeling that she was going to make a run for it, but instead she shut the door.

"I prefer not to advertise my disagreements with dissatisfied guests to the satisfied ones," Megan said.

"God damn it Megan, don't do that," Mac said reopening the door to make the point.

Megan gazed at him in amazement. "You want me to advertise what you see as my shortcomings to the other guests. Are you trying to destroy the business as well as irritate me to death?"

"No Megan... Mrs Roland, you have to be careful with guests, particularly single males, when you are out of sight of others."

This was a revelation. Lanell was worried about her. She wouldn't drop her guard any time soon, certainly not until she knew just what it was he wanted, but he seemed genuinely concerned about her. It felt good. It should have been even more irritating, but it felt good.

"Mr Lanell," she said, "I have been in the hospitality industry nearly ten years, I have been pinched black and blue and the men have always come off second best. I do not need you as a chaperon. Grateful as I am for the offer."

Mac, who had been looking for any clue that Mrs Roland might not be deeply involved in her

husband's transactions, for the first time seriously began to doubt that she was a party to defrauding international bankers of millions. The crimes she had in mind were pinching her bloody backside. If she was involved she would have had to have guessed by now that Mac was a threat to her. The realisation elated him. The thought of Megan Roland in prison hadn't been one he enjoyed.

"I'm sorry Mrs Roland, I think you misunderstand me. This morning my receptionist was badly beaten because....." Mac tailed off. He was not ready to talk about the dangers of international bank fraud just yet. He finished rather lamely, "...there are bad people about."

"And the bad people no doubt got your secretary alone using an unknown assailant. I'm wise enough to know that you are not going to murder me in here while my guests who have all had a chance to meet you are walking to and fro outside. Or at least the few that are left since you insist on having your door open to complain."

Mac had to acknowledge the wisdom of that. One of Mr Sum's henchmen would not advertise himself for a day or two before striking. He shut the door, but only after Megan had left through it.

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Megan was leaning on Eileen a lot but she thought the older woman didn't really mind. Megan's problems were probably only entertainment for a bored spinster. And if not Eileen then who? After Hugh there didn't seem to be anyone any more. For a silly moment she pictured Mac, but she could hardly confide in him when he was trying to rob her or Hugh or put her in prison...., or something. She really wasn't sure what and she needed to know. He'd have his floozy here soon. She hoped that this Wendy person would at least distract him and make him stop following her around, but somehow that thought wasn't as satisfying as it should be.

Eileen asked again – really Megan was getting very vague lately. Eileen hoped that the pressure she was under wasn't too much for her – "how do you know this woman is his mistress?" She wanted to ask why it mattered and why they had been talking about it for the last five minutes, but there were things here not to be said just yet.

Megan was getting impatient with her. "Oh really Eileen. What man cries tears over a bruised receptionist and summons her to a beach resort at his own expense if he's not getting rather more than the typing done?"

Eileen was tempted to say that a decent one might do that, but remained silent.

Eileen was pleased that Megan had giggled like a child over being caught doing some snooping of her own. Evidently Mr Lanell had a room full of computers and electronic gear as expected, but the search for more detail had been interrupted by the door bursting open and the search becoming a curtain arranging operation.

"Actually he took it rather well," Megan said. "We both knew what I was doing and why, but all he really seemed to care about was that I shouldn't be in a room with a man. Pretty odd really."

Eileen, who had a fairly good idea of how Megan could look after herself, could see that Mr Lanell, if he was a police investigator, might not be so confident, but again let it pass.

"Speaking of sneaky, womanising unwelcome guests. Here he comes," muttered Megan.

Mac carried a cup of coffee to the table by the two women. "Mrs Roland, I've mounted some equipment outside my window above the drive. I have an interest in meteorology and thought I would measure the sunlight hours while I'm here. It might help in your advertising." He smiled brightly, knowing that the surveillance cameras looked like what they were even with the little metal umbrellas above them. "I took care to protect the paintwork. I hope you don't mind," he added.

"I like to be told of quaint habits by my guests before they begin, Mr Lanell."

"Yes of course. I'm telling you as soon as I saw you." Mac prepared himself for a battle of wills over taking them down, but there was none. "My receptionist will be here soon," he said. "I wonder if she can have the vacant room next to mine?"

"You won't be sharing then?" Megan enquired in what she hoped was a bored monotone.

Mac chuckled, "Hell no. Wait till you meet her."

"She'd keep you awake all night I suppose."

Mac chuckled again. "Actually yes, but not for the reason you might think. There is only so much social conscience a man can cope with while trying to get to sleep. I think you'll really like her. Opposites attract and she's very opposite. And here she is," Mac exclaimed as he jumped up to meet a taxi that had swept up to the front door.

"That snivelling bastard just compared me unfavourably to his bimbo," Megan spluttered. "How dare he call me an opposite."

"I think he might have been saying you are not a bimbo," Eileen said a little uncertainly. "Megan what is wrong with you. You don't even know this woman. You may like her very much. And although Hugh may not have been the ideal husband lately, he is still your husband and it's all right for other people to have happy relationships."

"Right as always, oh wise counsellor, I shall welcome the female half of Snoops Incorporated and like it. She is most certainly welcome to Mr Chief Snoop."

Eileen turned away to hide a look of exasperation and watch the new arrival being escorted inside by Mac.

The first impression froze both women in their seats. Wendy was young, red haired, exuberant, short and somewhat overweight, dressed in the rejects from the opp shop, and appeared to have never visited a hairdresser or been particularly fussy with comb or brush.

Eileen's comment that the opposition was certainly opposite was mercifully lost in other noises because she regretted it as soon as she said it.

Wendy and Mac hugged enthusiastically and then Wendy spotted the immaculate blond woman across the restaurant and despite Mac's grab at her arm scampered over. "You're Megan Roland aren't you? Mac has told me about the wonderful place you run here. We are so lucky to be able to stay. Even if I had to get hit in the face before I was allowed to come. It should have been left as sand dunes for the birds of course but still the damage is done now. We might as well enjoy it. I love it already. Where do I go? Oh you shouldn't drink strong coffee it will make you nervous."

Wendy then wrapped Megan in her arms and kissed both cheeks.

Megan waved vaguely towards the reception area. "Sign in over there. You have the room next to Mr Lanell". Megan collapsed back into her seat. "Good God, what on earth just happened?"

"You met Mr Lanell's receptionist who thinks you should knock your hotel down and grow birds," chuckled Eileen. "Go easy on the coffee too."

"Who does she think she is? And why her?" Megan asked no one in particular. "Lanell may have the character of an anti-social snake, but he is an attractive man with a brain. Surely he can do better than that?"

"Meg you are becoming quite obnoxious. She seems to be a lovely young woman. Loud perhaps, not entirely tactful and not the snappiest of dressers, but a man could be very proud of her and it's not for you to judge people's relationships. She is also quite badly injured. She has a black eye and several large bruises."

Megan reached across the table and took Eileen's hand. "I need you Eileen. Keep reminding me that I have turned into a lonely spiteful old shrew. Mr Lanell is interested in me. For all the wrong reasons and probably because he wants to find Hugh, but I have been so alone lately that even a creepy investigator is something, and I didn't want to share." Megan got up. "I'll go and welcome my new guest but if she tells me what to drink and to knock the Moho down I reserve the right to kill the two of them."

Upstairs Megan planned her escape while Wendy jumped up and down saying. "I can see the sea from my bedroom. I can see the sea."

Mac, eyeing Megan's growing irritation was gently pressing down on her shoulders saying, "that's because it's seaside accommodation."

"But I've never stayed in seaside accommodation before. If there weren't all these car parks and roads and buildings all over the place the sea would be so much more accessible. People could walk here and enjoy it so much more once they got here and they would feel better for the exercise."

Mac looked helplessly at Megan. "I think she likes it. We'll be fine from here."

Megan was grateful to be on her way and to leave the two of them to get on with whatever they needed to do after a day apart.

In the corridor, Hemi was waiting to ask which unit he should do next. Megan had had no idea he would work so fast, but cabin eleven had become vacant so she suggested he try that. But the afternoon was wearing on and she didn't mind if he stopped. Wendy squeezed past her.

Wendy asked, "*He aha to iwi?*"

"*Ko Ngati Awa te iwi. Ko Whanganui-a-Tara te moana,*" Hemi replied.

"*Ko pakeha ahau, Ko Whanganui-a-Tara toku moana,*" Wendy said.

Megan understood enough introductory Maori to know that she had just heard a simple greeting and exchange of origins. The effect on Hemi was electric however. He bent forward and briefly touched his forehead and nose to Wendy's. The Maori hongi. The sharing of breath by way of greeting.

Megan checked to see what Mac was making of this, but he didn't seem to care. Obviously secure in his relationship and having seen the woman, Megan could understand why.

"Take me to see eleven," Wendy said, "I haven't seen anything yet. You can show me, and Mac and Megan won't have to be bothered by us."

Hemi gave a bewildered questioning look at Megan. He had no idea who this was and whether he was obliged or permitted to entertain her. Megan took pity on him and smiled. "Take her off our hands Hemi. She's quieter in the open air."

As they walked away Wendy wrapped her arms around Hemi's arm. Again Megan waited for Mac to intervene but he didn't. Megan felt a resentment at a relationship so trusting that one partner could show so much natural affection. It flashed briefly and bitterly through her that Wendy and apparently Mac had upbringings so different from her own that the showing of affection was just a natural part of life and not something to be hidden until safety could be guaranteed. Even then the object of that affection could one morning decide that he may never be back.

She asked, "Aren't you worried about Wendy going off with Hemi like that?"

"No it's ideal. It looks like I've employed a bodyguard. No one will attack her while she's hanging off Hemi."

That was not what Megan had meant. But Mac's reaction was too bewildering for her to persist.

The evening meal was remarkably pleasant. Mac and Wendy insisted on entertaining Eileen and managed to bring several of the other guests into their group. Hemi joined them and Wendy arranged to be up early to carry on removing the back wall of unit eleven. Mac Lanell protested that he paid her wages to which Wendy said she was on holiday and Mac was playfully shouted down trying to tell her she wasn't.

Hemi didn't seem to be too dismayed as he pushed his steak to the side of his plate after being told he was a burial ground consuming his fellow creatures, filling up his stomach with low quality protein which would lie there and rot and that he was responsible for filling the atmosphere with methane. Beans he learned tasted better, digested better, were better food and kinder to the planet. Hemi and Eileen accepted Mac's offer of a bottle of wine, which soon became two. Wendy explained to them that alcohol is an addictive poison which instead of raising spirits causes depression and that they should be ashamed of the example they were setting. Since she always gave advice happily and openly her fellow diners became used to ignoring it. Mac, Megan noticed, spent all evening with the same drink. Eventually Megan stopped pretending to be a stand-in waiter and joined them. They told her that the Moho was a wonderful place to stay and that the manager did an exceptional job. Megan shrugged it off but had to admit to herself that she was having the best time she had had since Hugh left and then with an ease that surprised her, acknowledged to

herself that it was better than she had had for some years before that. Or ever.

On one occasion Hemi, who had already told them he seldom drank wine, but had consumed most of the bottle, put an arm around Wendy and drew her close saying that they would be the best building team in the country and finished by lunchtime. Megan waited for a protest from Mac, but he just joked that they must hurry with her training because Wendy could fix up the office when she got back. The party broke up shortly after ten as they all had work to do the next day. Megan went home with the pleasant but slightly unnerving feeling of having had a party with friends.

On the wall outside Mac's unit was a suspicious looking device. It didn't look like a sun monitor to Megan. But what the hell, the damn man wouldn't spoil this evening with his snooping. She was going to bed.

Megan threw some clothes in the washer. She had an idiotic desire to say "take that Wendy" when she remembered the speech about how we wash too often in environmentally hostile detergents, when once a week in soap would do. The tart could go dirty. Megan was clean.

Speaking of clean, it had been a long hot day and the shower would feel good. An advantage of being completely alone was that modesty was pointless. Megan took off her clothes and added the white ones to the wash before she set off to the bathroom. She turned on the water and luxuriated in a flood of hot water. Happiness is a hot shower after a hard day's work. Megan swayed gently under the stream, washing off dirt as well as cares about Hugh, the creep, and the creepess. Everything was dirt down the drain. The washing machine fill cycle began. Megan's water faded down to a scalding dribble followed by a flood of cold water. At first the calm modern woman of the world prevailed. Suppressing her disappointment Megan stepped out of the shower, but what the hell, there was no one here. She was angry, tired and disappointed. Why not let it out. "Fuck you, you stupid bastard, why can't you just leave me in peace." she shouted, not sure if she was talking to the shower, the washing machine, Hugh or Mac Lanell. Enjoying a string of expletives Megan trooped through the house to turn off the washing machine. She would not be denied her shower.

In his room Mac settled in front of his computer. He could review again the accounts that contained transactions for Mr Hugh Roland. But that would prove nothing. Somewhere there were tens of millions of dollars that were being used for something. Mac was fairly confident that Mrs Roland was near the end of her tether with her husband. She would tell what she knew soon, either deliberately or accidentally, or perhaps Hugh would turn up. But anyway there was money somewhere. Hugh wasn't a gambler or a fool. He hadn't just thrown it away.

In the background his receivers murmured softly. Mac was not some sort of audio peeping tom. He was only eavesdropping on Mrs Roland to protect her. Suddenly above the muted sounds of domesticity she was screaming in rage and distress. For this Mac was being paid a huge retainer. Somehow he had failed to detect movement in the drive and death or capture were seconds away. Mac leapt up. He grabbed the alarm switch and key and mock gun that he had placed on the desk top for just this occasion. Yelling through the door to Wendy where he was going, he took the stairs six at a time.

Megan paused the washing machine. She would turn it back on before she went to bed. God, how many times would she make this mistake before she remembered that her unit was a poor relation to the massive water supply of the main building. She could not run a shower and washing machine together. She started back to the bathroom but paused as she thought there was something happening at the door. In horrified amazement she watched Mac Lanell cartwheel into the room,

and throw himself crouching back against the wall and freeze there holding a handgun in both hands out in front of himself. There are some moments in a life that burn themselves into the brain so that they can be recalled in detail for decades after. Despite its fleeting existence this was such a moment. The horrified naked woman gazed into the eyes of the hyper-tense gun-wielding man across three metres of lounge carpet. Thinking back later it fascinated Megan that once she had identified Mac, it never occurred to her that she was in danger. Humiliated, yes, violated in a passive sense, yes, angered and incensed, certainly, but it did not occur to her for a moment that the idiot was capable of physically harming her. In fury and shame she threw herself back into the kitchen and slammed the door.

Mac felt he could tell terror from anger and Megan's look had not seemed quite right for a damsel in mortal danger and screaming for help, but the stakes were too high to relax. He slid along the walls and into each room and checked out each cupboard. There was no sign of a break-in. In the bathroom he turned off the running hot water in the shower. Six months of sharing an office with Wendy was impossible to ignore. He had the presence of mind to get a bathrobe and take it to the kitchen door, and called, "Megan, are you able to come out?" and immediately cringed. Of course she wasn't, but what he meant was, "is there anyone in there with you?" He got the answer he deserved.

"Megan, reach around the door, I have a bathrobe."

Mac felt a warm affection at her trust when a wet arm appeared through the slightly opened door and took the offered robe. Shortly after that the door burst open and Mac was in trouble.

"You scared the fucking daylight out of me you brain-dead moron. You come here disrupt my Hotel, upset everyone you can get near. Peep and snoop and fill the place up with peeping snooping moronic staff members and then break into my house to check me out in my shower. I don't care if you are the police or the Mafia or the Pope. You can pack and you can go and if you don't I have friends in each of those organisations who can deal with you. And stop looking at my legs you pervert. You've already seen enough."

"I was looking downcast and contrite," said Mac who would have liked to have lightened the mood but was really not feeling so good about this. "I heard you scream."

"You heard me scream. You heard me scream. In future I will try to be very quiet in my own home so I don't disturb you. Unless I get attacked by more cold water in which case you can come somersaulting to my rescue."

Through the haze of anger and humiliation the truth struck home. "You heard me scream. How could you possibly hear me unless you had your ear to the keyhole and even if you did how did you get past my alarm and door lock? You have me bugged don't you, you unspeakable scum. You have abused my hospitality so much that you are listening to me in my shower."

As the anger began to die a nagging voice in Megan began to tell her that what really upset her was that he had seen her frightened, out of control and naked. To so many people, particularly ones like Megan Roland the first rule of existence is that no matter how bad things get, no one is to see you in any of those conditions. She was now sitting wet and miserable in her home with this obnoxious stranger, feeling diminished and violated. And yet the answer was in Mac Lanell himself. In some indefinable way he could give approval to make things at least a bit better.

Mac felt something of this. His relationship with this awkward woman had been bad, but really what should he do now?

"Megan, I'm truly sorry. I thought you were being attacked. You are in danger. It may be horrible but while you live alone you need someone who can come."

"I do not live alone. I have a husband. My double bed is for me and my husband. And not the office tart," she added as a final barb.

Mac puzzled briefly about who in her office might share her bed as the office tart but couldn't solve that one immediately and set it aside for later.

"Megan I don't believe you believe that. If Hugh shows his face he will be arrested or worse. He

will stay away for your sake and his.”

In his efforts to make amends, Mac did not notice that he had let slip information that Megan had not had. Megan, who's hopes of marriage had been so high was married to a man wanted by the law and in trouble with criminals. Megan, who had refused to believe it, had kept despair as well as this obnoxious man at bay with denial and anger. She felt them drain from her. In a futile effort to hide the tears she dropped her face into her hands but wracking sobs took over.

Mac couldn't feel remorse. If the outrages of this evening allowed Megan to cry for a missing husband and to face the risks of her new life, then something good had happened. He put a comforting arm around her and drew her close. Their bodies reacted to each other and they melted together. Megan raised her head a little. It was a natural comforting gesture to raise her head further with a finger under her chin and settle a gentle kiss on her. His hand slid down her shoulder and arm and onto her side, followed the contour in to a slender waist and coming to rest on her hip. The robe, which was hardly adequate when standing up, was now dragged to the top of her thighs and Mac was all too aware that she was wearing nothing underneath. The discomfort of his growing erection while sitting in his trousers brought him to senses. He had to get out. This woman was married and he was being paid to investigate her and her husband. He was raging out of control. Even as he tried to convince himself he was reclaiming the moral high ground a discomforting voice in his head told him that if he took advantage of Megan Roland now she would hate him forever and while that was already a strong possibility he could not bear to antagonise her further.

Feeling he should not leave but too aroused to linger, he apologised again and hurried out the door, locking it and setting the alarm as he went. If Eileen's lights had been on he would have asked her to go to Megan, but there was no sign of her.

He didn't hear Megan say to his departing form that now that he was worked up with a real woman he would be needing his slut. Fighting a desire to collapse back into self pitying sobs, she finished her shower and went to bed. Her soggy washing remained paused in the bottom of her washing machine.

Mac called through Wendy's door that it had been a false alarm and went back to reviewing bank statements because he knew sleep would be some time coming tonight.

Wednesday:

Wednesday began strangely but not nearly as badly as Mac had feared. Wendy seemed to have been up half the night working so that she could go to be Hemi's assistant. Since almost any other employee would have expected days or weeks off work to recover from a beating this seemed a small price.

Megan was up early as always, welcoming and farewelling with a smile. Amazingly she said nothing about removing the equipment she now knew was in her house. Mac felt a pang of shame that she was trapped into having to put up with an injustice like that. She wouldn't feel safe in going to the police. She probably wouldn't feel safe if it was taken away. She couldn't appeal to Mac. She was going to bear it. It was a wretched situation for anyone, and she was a proud woman.

In fact Mac had become invisible to her. By standing directly in front of her and saying good morning he managed to get a grunt, but then by lingering on in the same spot, he was asked if he wanted something. He felt that the answer should be yes but when he examined it more closely his thoughts were a mush of Mrs Roland's happiness, sex, and catching criminals, and so he said no. Eileen Hammond talked to Megan in undertones for a little while. Mac tried not to watch too closely but thought he caught some conspiratorial glances at him from the two women.

Wendy however was having the time of her life. Staying away from home in classy accommodation was living up to all she could hope for. Suddenly she had it all. She was surrounded by people who were relaxed enough to have it explained to them that they should not be using plastic bags and that

they must never leave them where they could blow into the sea. Several guests setting off for a drive had been told of the benefits of walking and how many extra things they would see. One family even got back out of their car. Meat sales in the restaurant had dropped a little and Tony was preparing more vegetarian dishes than he was used to.

And there was Hemi. He was fun, kind and understood what really mattered in the world. And she was helping him by working in the sun at healthy active jobs that gave her a sense of satisfaction. By evening two more cabins would be done, and she knew she had made a real contribution. The high point started badly. Hemi suddenly became serious and took her hands. Wendy recognised the change of pace and inwardly she wept. She was not a man's woman. She wasn't a woman's woman if it came to that. This was the bit where the man said. "Wendy you are really good fun and I really respect what you believe in, but...." The but bit varied but it always meant that she was on her own again and would she please not keep ringing or pushing herself on to the guy. What the hell. It had been a fun 2 days, well less than one really, but that was pretty good for her. She could handle rejection. She knew all about rejection.

True to script Hemi looked solemnly at her and said that the time he had spent with her had been more fun and stimulating than any for a long time. Wendy waited for the but. Her eyes pricked a bit and her throat went uncomfortably dry.

"I'm afraid this is going to be a bit of speech," Hemi was saying.

"Yeah, yeah. Cut to the please go away part," Wendy thought.

Hemi continued, "I really don't know you well enough to say this, but I need to get it done while I'm feeling brave enough and while I might still be able to handle you walking out of my life if you want to. I have never known a woman who was fun and casual about fun and casual things and serious and caring about things that matter - and could tell the difference. I feel closer to you after a day here than I could ever dream of being with anyone else after a lifetime. I really don't know what I'm asking of you but I want us to stick around, I think perhaps forever."

Wendy told him that that would not be a hardship and collapsed against him hugging and laughing.

By lunchtime Mac had used up all his diplomatic skills and his host had not thawed at all. He would give feelings time to settle so he took some bread and cheese and fruit for a simple meal and set off to find Wendy. The weather had cooled and clouds were hanging over the inland mountains. But the Moho still sparkled, the grass looked fresh and lush and the whisper of the sea came gently in from beyond flower gardens and hedges. Mrs Roland had a way of keeping things in order, even if her methods required his close attention. Mac smiled to himself at the thought of giving Megan his close attention. Sometimes you could get too close.

Wendy and Hemi were taking time out for a carton of fruit juice and the newspaper. As Mac arrived, Hemi joked contentedly to Mac that he would offer him coke but the caffeine would give him nervous tension and the carbon bubbles would ruin the atmosphere. Wendy thumped an elbow into his ribs without looking up. Mac flinched but Hemi just chuckled.

Hemi and Mac smiled across Wendy as she attempted to eat lunch, read the paper and keep one arm around Hemi at the same time. At last in exasperation she put down her drink released Hemi and slapped the newspaper flat. "Look at this. These big business people just don't know how the world works. They want to build another commercial centre and shopping mall in Auckland. As if Auckland doesn't have places for commerce. They have gone ahead and spent millions of dollars before they find out that there is Maori land there that they can't use. There's a stream essential to local biodiversity, the roads are inadequate for the extra traffic, and the existing business interests can't compete. Now they have Greenies, Maori, business *and* roading lobby all against them but they are still saying that they will get the go ahead. So they've found some extra money for what is really just bribes and expect to get consent so we get another unsustainable concrete monster we don't need."

“There's a lot of guess-work and luck in a big project even for a rich well organised developer,” Mac said. And then he felt a prickle down the back of his neck that built until it felt like a physical blow. “Shit, Roland.”

Wendy picked the change of tone immediately and Mac could see in her eyes, she had caught up with him. She picked up the story.

“The time frame and the amount all fit. A rapid gathering of money. No one will mind because it goes into a high return investment. Then not one, not even two or three but four powerful political lobbies all complain together. The high value sure fire investment falters and stops. What does one do with millions of dollars of fraudulent money in a stalled project?”

“One runs, is what one does,” exclaimed Mac. “And one probably tries to stay out of sight long enough to get the project going again. Hell Wendy if you didn't spend so much time hugging trees you could be a big time investor developer.”

“Hugging trees, is more useful,” Wendy replied, “that's why I have found a personal portable tree to hug.” She leant back significantly onto Hemi.

“Well I do thank you ma'am. I think,” chuckled Hemi.

Mac's excitement was palpable. “East..., god what was it? Eastend or something?”

“Eastgate,” Wendy supplied.

The investors were unknown. Each of the existing supermarket chains accused the others of subterfuge in not revealing their intentions or identity. The negotiator was a small time lawyer who kept his client secret. But the project had earned both derision and sympathy for the way it had burst into being and then died as it ran into a wall of opposition. Newspaper editorials would one day rail against irresponsible fringe groups who combined to stymie the honest endeavours of innovative new exciting projects, and then the next day say the same about irresponsible developers who flattened communities regardless of the price to those communities, and their competitors. Mac had been amused by a cartoon showing caricatures of an environmentalist, a Maori, a mayor and a businessman in bed together with a shopping mall smashed on the floor and the caption “But will you still love me tomorrow?”

Mac was furious with himself for not thinking of Eastgate, but after all it had been out of the news for several months and he had only been concerned with Mr Roland's investments for the last few days.

Hemi munched a sandwich and watched the growing animation of the other two. One he cared for deeply and the other he respected as a compassionate man with a good brain. Quite why Eastgate should cause such a stir he couldn't at first see, but the Roland family clearly were involved in some way and these two investigated bank accounts. An uneasy understanding began to form. He didn't feel good about it. Mrs Roland was a stuck up creature with an over active sex drive, but the idea of spying from inside her own units was not his way. Then he thought of the woman on his arm and found it unlikely that this was anything evil. He asked, “How does an Auckland commercial development affect the Moho?”

Wendy looked to Mac for permission and received a small nod.

Hemi marvelled at how she could adapt her personality to the needs and thoughts of the moment.

“Keep it quiet Hemi, this is a criminal investigation, but one or both of the Rolands, neither of whom are stupid, have misplaced enough money to begin building a shopping and commercial centre in a major city. It doesn't follow that this is it, but there are only so many faltering investments of this size and occurring at this time. My erstwhile boss will get to the bottom of it. Probably without adequately acknowledging or rewarding the employee who brought it to his attention.”

“Is this the employee who is enjoying a late summer holiday at the beach while she finds romance and learns about the building industry at her boss's expense?” Mac asked.

Wendy grinned cheerfully. “Yes, that is the one I had in mind.”

Mac did a routine visual check of Mrs Roland. She was safe and keeping herself in public places so he went to his bedroom-office and began a search of an obscure Auckland lawyer. A breakthrough came quickly and Mac thrilled at what he found. There was a trust fund with a great deal of money. Some had been spent, and when Mac compared the outgoings with purchase of land and applications for permits at Eastgate there was a match. As he expected there was only a code name and there was no direct link to Hugh, but a cunning operator like Roland was not going to set up a major scam, steal tens of millions of dollars, launder it through a European band, find an obscure and probably dishonest lawyer and then allow him to set up a fund labelled -'stolen money to be used by Hugh Roland to pay for development of Eastgate'. Mac was satisfied. His main job was to find the money and this was almost certainly it. There was a later deposit of ten million. Mac wondered if this was Mr Sum's contribution. This would be extra money brought in when things started getting difficult. Mac wondered angrily why Roland didn't just pay it back to protect Megan. Did keeping the project alive matter more to him than she did? Was he hoping the Moho would be sold, possibly on the death of his wife and that that would help keep him afloat for a while longer? As things stood the Moho was only in Megan's name and safe. It was a tempting theory, but Mac didn't believe the Roland marriage had sunk that low. There was something else going on in the rather odd relationship of Mr and Mrs Roland. Mac wondered what would happen when he reported back to the bank. It might be possible to force the breaking of the Auckland fund. But lawyers' trust funds were notoriously hard to get at without clear evidence. Mr Roland shouldn't panic yet. Mac had a suspicion that he never did.

Eileen hated to think that she could get pleasure from people's misfortunes, but she was honest enough to admit that the excitement of being part of the thrills at the Moho was enjoyable. During Hugh's time she had felt tolerated but not welcome in her neighbours' lives. Now she was part of the vibrancy of being in a human community with its frailties and foibles. It was what she had trained for and she would contribute what she could. She was delighted when Mac came to join her and offer a pre-dinner drink. Eileen rehearsed several ways to say what was really troubling her but could think of nothing better than a direct approach.

"You visited Megan last night?"

"A mistake," I thought there was someone with her. "What did she say?"

"Something about you are the conniving spawn of Satan who snoops and peeps and ruins innocent lives, but honestly I didn't believe too much of it because the real crime was not that you went there but that you left, however I won't trouble you with that because you are too much of a dim man to understand."

Mac knew what he had done. "I hurried off when she was crying and needing me," Mac said. "I didn't like me either."

Eileen gazed at him approvingly. "I didn't know about the crying. Then why did you leave her like that?"

Although Eileen was rather unsure of what had happened the previous evening, the abrupt way Mac broke off the conversation and jumped up to greet Hemi and Wendy confirmed her suspicion that something more than an embarrassing mistake had happened last night.

Watching from the office, Megan was shocked to see Wendy rush across the room, give Mac a hug and a kiss and then go back to Hemi for the same. God the woman was shameless, and Mac took it. Surely he had more self respect than that. She went to find jobs elsewhere.

The evening pleasantries took over. More drinks were ordered and they agreed that they should try to get Megan to leave off fussing about the Moho and join them again for dinner.

Mac found her in one of the units calming a guest who had lost a wallet. With the wallet recovered from the bedside cupboard where its owner had put it, Megan agreed to join them, and she and Mac

walked back to the restaurant together. She made it clear to Mac that she would enjoy Eileen's company even if he was also at the table.

As they walked Mac asked as casually as he could, "Did Hugh invest in Eastgate?"

Megan glanced towards him, but there was no sign of the shock and dissembling that Mac sought. The subject was significant to her but not in the way he had expected.

"Hugh had an interest early on when we came back to New Zealand, but he invested in this," she waved vaguely around the walls, "so nothing came of it. It was a sweet gesture of him," she added. "Once the clearance comes through, Eastgate will be a big money spinner. Hugh lost a lot to give me this."

Mac asked, "This is what you want?" He hadn't meant it to sound cynical but it came out badly.

"I could do without deranged guests hurling themselves into my house during the night, but yes, when we came back to New Zealand Hugh asked if I wanted help to set up a business. By then I was experienced in the Australian hospitality industry and this was ideal. Have you finished grilling me about my affairs or will this continue while I try to take a shower?" Megan's voice dropped as they reached the table. She was going into areas best forgotten.

The meal passed pleasantly. Wendy said that her boss had bought her dinner two nights in a row and there were at least some advantages to getting beaten up. Megan made sure that they got some extras with their meal on the house. Eileen kept them laughing with tales of adolescent girls and Hemi had them in hysterics with a mock play acted by himself of how his several aunts kept the brood of boys in order. Megan and Wendy maintained a hostile non-interaction that had Mac puzzled. Or at least after a few conversational gambits Wendy gave up and talked to the other three, as did Megan. For a wonderful few minutes Megan and Mac discovered a mutual love of the film *Sleuth*. Animation consumed them and they recounted the story together and the skills of the two actors who carried it off. Then Megan found herself looking into Mac's eyes, excited and lost in a world of make-belief and looked abruptly away and said dismissively, "but it's a very old film now."

The party broke up later than any of them had expected. As Mac escorted Eileen to the door, she said, "You're good for her Mac. Don't give up on her."

Mac wasn't sure what it was he mustn't give up and said so but Eileen smiled and ignored him.

>>>>>

Mac settled over his computers. The day hadn't been very demanding and he could get some work done before he went to bed. He doubted that much more in the way of Hugh's Auckland transactions would come to light but he had to look. On his shelf the speaker clicked as Megan closed her door. Looking out his window he saw the light go on. He felt a sadness that didn't make any sense to him. Megan's disappointment in her husband perhaps. The muddle of the night before. But Megan seemed to have understood and accepted that that would never happen again. Perhaps it was just the sadness of human frailty in a place that felt like paradise. He wondered if Hemi and Wendy had gone to bed separately. He hoped Wendy's new love didn't end as Megan's seemed to have.

Mac stiffened at the murmur in the speaker. God, he couldn't go there two nights running. It was a man's voice. No, there was Megan. Damn the quality wasn't good enough but she sounded strained. Hugh. It would be Hugh in the house. Only he could get in without disturbing the alarms and not cause Megan to scream. He turned the unit up but it just made the jumble of interference louder. Suddenly Megan's voice could be heard clearly and loudly as if it came from a point directly below the microphone. "There is no point threatening me. I don't know where my husband is."

Mac sprang up, grabbed his equipment and ran to bang on Wendy's door. He hoped that Hemi was with her.

"If I'm not back in fifteen minutes call the police as we agreed, and don't come after me."

Mac took the steps as he had the night before and ran for Megan's house, keeping in the shadows as

best he could. At the door he confirmed the alarm was off and opened the door as quietly as he could. Freezing in the doorway he heard a soft male voice followed by Megan saying clearly and loudly. "But I can do something for you. Sit back against the end of the sofa and I'll give you a little show first."

A low male voice said, "That's not what I came for but you can give me a show if you want."

"Just wait there and I'll tell you when you can come a bit closer," Megan said in a crooning voice."

"Now I am not a very patient man Mrs Roland. I want to see a little more than your lovely waist."

Megan swayed gently slowly lowering her slacks as she did. God, she had danced in a G-string in a hotel to the delight of the guests. How hard could it be to keep her intruder occupied while Mac got himself positioned. Listening intently she thought perhaps she could hear him at the door but the man in front of her was threatening to close the gap between them. Megan dropped onto her knees and stroked his trousers. "Not yet," she said clearly. "You are not nearly aroused enough for a woman like me. Not yet". She unzipped him. The goon moaned gently and lowered his gun hand as Megan stroked.

Megan lunged forward grabbing the gun in both hands shouting "Now!" as she moved.

Focussed entirely on holding the gun pointed at the floor, she missed the spectacle of Mac hurling himself sideways out of her little entrance area, back against the wall as he had the previous evening and then sprinting across the room.

The gun fell to the floor and Megan grabbed it, and rolled away. The unwanted visitor lay back whimpering, his previously conspicuous erection rapidly drooping. Mac stood over him.

Megan gave Mac enough clear space and inspected the gun. "This is a toy," she said.

"I only had to scare you," the wreck on the sofa said. "I wasn't to hurt you at all. Just threaten. The sex was your idea." Megan and Mac glanced ironically at each other. Their captive was nearly crying. He looked nervously at the door. "Marty will come in a few minutes, don't shoot me. Shoot him," he added as if he had had a clever idea. "I was only allowed half an hour." Mac signalled him to the door with the muzzle of the gun. "Take your gloves off and press your hands and fingers on the glass."

"They told me not to take my gloves off for anyone."

"Did they tell you to get shot?"

He did as he was told.

To Megan's amazement Mac demanded id and name and address. She nearly laughed but Mac just bundled the crook out the door and told her to follow. "Come on, stay close. We get Charlie here off the premises and get you safe."

Megan felt like protesting but Mac had his hands full, and their tame crook seemed genuinely frightened of who might come down the drive. This was not the time to be proudly independent and Mac seemed to know what he was doing. The three of them hurried up the drive. At the hotel entrance Megan went inside and Mac released the man professing to be Harry Ventnor and sent him on his way. Mac backed in the door and put an arm around Megan. "Are you ok?"

Megan was inwardly shaken, but outwardly just angry. "I'd be a great deal better if you hadn't just let the man who held a gun at my head and threatened to kill me go free," Megan said, the stress of the evening beginning to be replaced with rage.

Mac, with an arm still around her, guided her up the stairs. "We need to be somewhere where we can't be got at too easily," he said. "I think our Harry Ventnor was telling the truth, perhaps even including his name. He was the little fish sent out to test the waters. Probably he was being thrown to the wolves and they would leave him with us if he was caught. In which case he is not closely attached to any major criminals and can't be used to trace them. Otherwise they intended to come in and get him. In which case we were in too much danger. Anyway, a dim criminal like that has been caught before. It's a small matter to bring him in."

"And you sought my opinion on all this?" said Megan with as much venom as she could manage.

But even as she said it she knew Mac was right and it was stress and fear doing the talking and not

her usual calm reason.

Mac called through Wendy's door that they were alright but to stay in and locked because there had been intruders. Wendy called something back and there was silence.

Megan sat on the edge of Mac's bed. A little girl's voice somewhere inside her told her she just wanted to snuggle into bed with someone, anyone, even this obnoxious man but a louder voice shouted over the top of it that she had let herself down yesterday evening and she wasn't going to snivel on Mr Lannel's shoulder again. And she certainly wasn't going to do what he probably thought was his due after coming to her rescue, especially with his tart sleeping about 5 metres away, even if there was a wall.

Megan listened to the last of the call to the police that Mac was making. So she was codenamed *longsand* was she? Tracking dogs would be sent as soon as someone could be roused. Mac gave a description and even a name of their intruder. At this the two of them shared a brief smile across the phone. Mac described where they could take a very fine set of prints on the glass of the door and put the phone down.

"Room seven is vacant," Megan said as she stood up. "I won't go back home tonight."

"You won't go home any night," Mac replied. "That episode we've just been through was either to get you or to scare you. If to get you then they may come back. If to scare you, well you seem to be unscareable, but I'm not. There's a limit to the number of times I'm going to run down your drive expecting to get shot. You stay in my room tonight."

"Oh that will be nice for me, after the way you treated me last night when you broke into my home and groped me." Megan's natural honesty told her that she wasn't being fair. She knew she was being treated considerably when Mac made no reference to her sobbing wetly and nearly naked over him.

Instead Mac said softly, "I apologised for last night, but you must stay with me tonight. I will behave." To himself Mac muttered, "God knows how".

Megan and Mac tensed as a car came down the drive. Megan, closest to the window hid the tumult she was in by looking out. A policeman went into her house.

Mac was glad to break the tension and hurried to the door, but he had no idea how Megan would react to uniformed police checking on her and her home. He had no choice but to warn her the way he would any civilian wanted by the law. "Megan, if you leave while I am gone you will be in danger and you will become a fugitive. You will be pursued and taken into police custody. You won't be that silly will you?"

Megan, who now had it confirmed that both she and Hugh were suspects in Mr Lanell's eyes was too angry to speak. She shook her head.

Wendy had given them enough time. There was a policeman at the Roland house so surely it must be alright to go to Mac's room and find out what was going on. She pulled on her teddy-bear-and-patch nightgown and wished Hemi was with her, although that could have been difficult and would give that Roland woman more reason to despise her. She had no idea what she had done but she could not break through the snooty woman's chill, which was very odd because Megan could act the warm and friendly host to everyone else. Wendy tried hard to like and be liked by everyone, but Megan was a lost cause.

In the next room Wendy found Megan and Mac sitting on Mac's bed and a policeman who seemed to be a little awed by both of them taking a statement. He praised Megan for her courage and received a distracted nod. The ice lady, true to form was glaring at Wendy. "Would you like me to use Wendy's room?" she asked, "Wendy could sleep here." She chose not to add, "as usual". Mac and Wendy exchanged a puzzled glance. They could see no point in an arrangement that left them uncomfortable and Megan unprotected next door. Instead Mac ignored the suggestion and offered to sleep in a chair by the door. Megan had to endure an appraising stare from the policeman as he

calculated how long that arrangement would last once everyone else had gone to bed. Megan felt a need to snap that Mac would be staying there all night. God what was the Askey woman wearing? Megan hadn't worn anything like that since she was five years old, and probably not then either. At last everyone, the police and Wendy left. Megan, fully dressed, turned her back on Mac, pulled the sheets over herself, put a pillow over her head and pretended to sleep. Mac gazed down. The hunched figure looked smaller under the bedclothes. A stream of creamy hair emerged from under the pillow and fell about the sheets. Mac wondered irrelevantly if ostriches really do hide their heads and stand out in the open when they are frightened. Mac turned away for an uncomfortable night in the chair. Tomorrow he would come to a more sensible arrangement, but tonight he needed to know where Mrs Roland was and she needed someone who could defend her. He checked the door lock and put two armchairs facing each other and settled himself in them. It would be a long night. A soft voice from the bed said, "lie down on the bed".

"Megan, I don't think that would be a good idea. You've had enough tonight. You don't want to add fighting off a man who can't control himself."

"We both have clothes on," Megan said. "Lie on top of the sheets if you feel safer, but I won't get to sleep with you in the chair". Megan turned towards Mac, and gave him a small encouraging smile. Mac lay down and put an arm over her, softly muttering his thanks. Megan reached out of the sheets and pressed Mac's arm.

"Don't worry I won't tell Wendy," Megan said as she relaxed again.

Mac assumed she was too sleepy to know what she was saying and kissed her gently. Megan took it to be a kiss of gratitude and stiffened with rage at his callousness, but she was too tired to hold any emotion more than a few seconds and went to sleep.

Thursday:

Thursday continued the run of warm, clear weather.

Mac was up early and made himself respectable enough to leave the room so that Megan could do whatever it was women did first thing in the morning. To Mac's relief Megan soon appeared out in the office as busy and aloof as usual, burying the trials of the night in her strong personality. To Megan's relief Mac didn't attempt to talk of the night before and ignored the subject of any physical contact. The Askey woman seemed to be philosophical about losing her lover for the night and only teased Mac a little about having a woman in his room.

To Wendy's joy, Hemi's ardour hadn't been diminished any by a night's absence in his cabin. Hemi and Eileen and several inquisitive guests sat wide eyed while they were brought up to date with tales of armed intruders being brought to heel by Megan, Mac and a contingent of police. In an effort at customer damage control, Megan put up a public message thanking everyone for their efforts to catch and remove from society some troublemakers whom the police had taken into custody. It was a lie, but it seemed to fit its purpose of explaining away a police visit and making everyone feel that they had had an exciting adventure and were now perfectly safe. As Megan muttered to Eileen, she could survive guns being waved in her face, but not dozens of guests packing their bags and leaving for somewhere safer.

Megan settled herself in the room opposite Wendy's. As long as it had security equipment and Megan was careful about whom she opened the door to, she would be safe with Mac just down the corridor. Megan protested that this was an idiotic intrusion into her life, but she no longer believed that herself and resentfully accepted Mac and his plans for her protection.

Mac filled the day as best he could. Wendy did office work for him for a while and then disappeared to help Hemi with the last of the cabins. Megan ruthlessly found another day's work for them to do. Mac chuckled to himself to think that Megan having got free labour under their

guarantee arrangement was too much the business woman to let Hemi go a day early just because he worked fast.

Whenever Megan was out of sight for more than fifteen minutes Mac grew restless and went to find her. He knew he was driving her crazy but this was better than some of the alternatives. Then came the time he couldn't find her at all. He checked around the office and on the usual cleaning and maintenance circuit. Tension rising, he hurried into the lower accommodation corridor. He was about to rush back to the office and demand to know who had last seen Mrs Roland when the door of twenty-one opened and she stepped out. For a moment their eyes met and before she could conceal it, Mac saw the tell-tale flicker of someone who has been caught out. As calmly as she could, she folded a piece of paper into her trouser pocket and went to step past him.

"Problem?" he asked casually.

"Really Mr Lanell, you do not need to follow me everywhere. He ...ah had a dripping tap. I turned it off harder. It will do until we replace the washer."

Mac considered holding her against the wall and taking the concealed paper. Megan seldom looked rattled, even when she had a gun pointed at her, but she was uncomfortable now.

Mac decided to bide his time and carried on walking.

Once Megan had gone he knocked on the door of twenty-one. "Hello Mr Witherspoon," he greeted heartily. "How's the plumbing?"

Witherspoon gazed at him with owlsh puzzled eyes.

"Plumbing?"

"Mrs Roland agreed to replace the tap with the loose handle?"

Understanding began to dawn. "Yes, I don't know what it has to do with you, but it's quite usable and she said she'd replace it."

Mac fought back an urge to take Witherspoon by the collar and slam him against the wall until the truth came out, but that too could wait.

Mac checked again that Megan was where she was safe and went to his room. Witherspoon had received no mail or special deliveries recently that Mac knew of. But he did have an unusual pattern of ringing a general office supply and communications company. Mac had assumed that just meant he was staying in touch with his work, although he was old enough not to work, and seemed to have retired. Mac cursed himself for being too casual with Witherspoon simply because he seemed old and harmless.

Mac dialled the number that Witherspoon used so often and got a bright young thing on the line who introduced herself as Mannie and the company as *Teleoffice*.

It was a very long shot, but better than attacking old men and young women in the corridors of Hotels. "Witherspoon here. Are there any messages?"

"No Mr Witherspoon. You know your call schedule. Nothing since the last one this morning."

"Sorry Mannie I wrote it down and misplaced it. Remind me."

A sigh of exasperation came down the line. "Sir, we spent some time on it. You know how we operate."

"Please Mannie, I will keep it with me this time."

"Write it down carefully. Message to be given into Mrs Roland's hand in private. Saturday morning 10am at the car park outside Happy Hamburger, Waikanae. Follow red car with special registration. Instructions when stops. Bring Lanell if you trust him. Toy frog."

"That's it?"

"Yes sir. Oh, I should have asked your password or I can get into trouble."

"Ah..... deadly nightshade," Mac hazarded with assumed confidence.

"What are you talking about Mr Witherspoon?"

"I've forgotten that as well, sorry," Mac said quickly and put down the phone.

Witherspoon opened his door to a firm knock. Mac stepped quickly into the room. "Plumbing been replaced has it Mr Witherspoon?"

"Yes thank you. It's fine. Call me Arthur."

"That was very quick. Mrs Roland is very efficient."

"That's because there was never a problem with the plumbing as you well know."

Mac got out his id and waved it in Witherspoon's face and put it away. He had had it made to look as official as possible. Although it had no legal status, most people were sufficiently intimidated by a large confident man carrying an important looking piece of paper to behave themselves. Many simply didn't care.

"I'm an investigator and I have to tell you that there have been serious crimes against people and property that you have implicated yourself in. If you explain your involvement you may avoid complicity charges."

Witherspoon was a tougher nut to crack than Mac had anticipated.

"I know who you are and that that piece of paper you just waved around too quickly for me to read has no official value. It is not yet a crime to talk to people in New Zealand, even if they are Jack the Ripper. Please leave whenever you wish. And since you share a bed with Mrs Roland, you might talk to her and examine yourself for complicity."

This withered little creature was earning his respect. Mac upped the stakes.

"I've talked to Mrs Roland and she wants to know more about the red car."

"Then you haven't talked to Mrs Roland or you would know that she knows that that message which you have obtained illegally is all I have. Shoot the messenger if you wish but I will still be only a messenger."

"Who do you work for Witherspoon? If I don't get an answer I believe, then you will have to go to the police who can get it out of you."

"You have the advantage of me Mr Lanell because I can't tell if you have the whole message. If you have then I have failed to keep things secret and I might as well tell you the rest."

Mac appreciated the honesty and loyalty of that and recited the whole message.

Witherspoon crumbled a little. "I stayed at the Moho a few months ago. I enjoyed myself and befriended Hugh Roland and his wife. Or at least as much as anyone can. About two weeks ago Hugh came to my house and said he was unable to go home at present but he feared for Mrs Roland and needed a contact here. He pays my tariff. I leave messages on a message service. This is the first message that has come the other way and I delivered it to Mrs Roland. My next message will be that I have failed to remain secret and I will have to go home. I would not tell you this if that last message had not mentioned you favourably. I have mentioned you in my reports; I regret to say always unfavourably. I have suggested that you are after that lovely woman both sexually and as a criminal investigator. I find that deplorable."

Mac was beginning to like the old man. "Don't leave until Hugh tells you," he said. "I think we may be nearly on the same side."

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When Mac reported in to his various bosses they were well pleased. Yesterday he had found the money and possibly saved Mrs Roland's life, and today he had moved a step closer to Hugh. Their uninvited guest from last night was still on the loose but there was not much hope that he knew anything helpful and he would turn up eventually.

Mac watched each gesture of Megan's partly because he liked doing it, but always waiting for her to take him into her confidence. She was brittle and nervous but unbending. That night, Eileen didn't come to the Moho, and Megan, Mac and Wendy, tired from the night before retired early. Hemi, was quietly admitted to the room next to Mac's where he kept Wendy awake for an extra two hours

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Mac joined Wendy and Eileen for breakfast.

Across the room Megan gazed at the tender looks and hand holding in the breakfast room. How was it possible that a man who could find out every time she sneezed could also have his lover bonking away in the next room while he stayed blissfully unaware and in love? And how was it possible that the bloody Askey woman had everyone worshipping the soles of her feet, while she, Megan Roland, had one lonely old woman to confide in. And that lonely old woman was now letting her breakfast get cold as she hung on every word the fashion statement from hell uttered? Megan would show them. Tomorrow she would slip away. Sort things out with Hugh. She paused in her thoughts. And what? Live happily ever after by herself? Yes she would. It wasn't the standard fairy tale finish but

fairy tales were lies anyway. No one lived happily ever after unless they were doing something they loved and free to do it, as she was. She would be her own fairy tale finish. And bloody Wendy Askey could marry her various lovers one after the other and be unhappy with all of them. While Lanell was busy holding hands with his unfaithful slut Megan could go and get some jobs done. She needed to remind the cleaners that the cabins were ready for hiring and to make sure they were serviced.

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Mac's day continued quietly. Hemi and Wendy were now employed below in the office area. Tomorrow Hemi could go home and Mac would have to decide what to do with Wendy. He couldn't let this drag on forever. Megan couldn't stay here once he and Wendy went. How long could she be away from the Moho? She wouldn't like it. The whole thing had an unfinished or unfinishable feeling to it. Catch Hugh. Have a high profile trial. Return what money was left. It would take time and be untidy, but crime is untidy and at least Mrs Roland was still alive and he knew where she was. Perhaps a few more weeks, or maybe just a day would see her safe forever. Mac waited in vain for her to invite him to see Hugh tomorrow. He didn't feel good about it. It was ridiculous for law enforcement to feel they were betraying a criminal by catching him but he had lived too close to part of Hugh's life to feel detached. And how would Megan feel? In her mind she was still a married woman. Soon she would be a married woman with a husband in prison for at least 2 years and probably more like 10. How would she feel about Mr Lanell then? Mac didn't want to examine too closely why he cared about what Mrs Roland felt about him once her husband was out of the way.

As he mused Mac had been trying to break into a computer that had frequently accessed one of Hugh's smaller accounts. There was a distinct possibility it was Hugh's own computer, but it was secure and usually turned off. He had had no luck. Suddenly he was there. As quickly as he could he began to take a copy of the files in the documents folder. The constant internet activity would alert anyone watching. He had to hope that Hugh was out of the room. The download stopped. Mac cursed. He had quite a bit but he had been tumbled. Excitedly he re-established contact but the documents folder was now empty except for a single file called Lanell. Mac downloaded it and read. "You are good. Take care of her."

Mac wrote "Mrs Roland good," but when he went to upload it, the computer was disconnected. Mac would read the files later meanwhile he had to check on Megan and then get lunch.

The kitchen area was chaos with Hemi and Wendy extending a workbench. Megan, who was suffering nerves over the meeting of the next day, had found reasons to walk out to the cabins. Mac, worried that he had gone too long without seeing her, enquired where she had gone and set off after her.

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Bert Travers was getting irritated. With the Roland woman spending nights upstairs next to the Askey woman and Lanell, he was now in charge of a snatch in daylight. That was not his way. He liked to be able to just sneak in and do it by himself. By himself. He looked at the driver next to him. He didn't use getaway drivers but they said he had to. Park close make sure she knows she has to shut up and get in and be quickly away. Change cars so that the nosy parkers can't identify them and dump Mrs Roland now without her personal bodyguard at the address where she will be politely interrogated about the whereabouts of her husband. Bert wished he had been invited to the interrogation. But he hadn't. He could find out where this Hugh Roland character was in no time. But his real problem was that the lazy bitch never came to the other end of the place that she was supposed to be looking after.

But patience has its rewards. Mrs Roland was coming. Bert could think of some other business he would like to transact with her himself before she was interrogated, but that wasn't going to happen either. Bert slipped the knife he would use into its pouch and for good measure slipped a hand gun into his pocket. His driver was suddenly making noises about guns. Some crap about he didn't want to be an accessory to a shooting. Well good for him. All he had to do was to sit there with the engine running and drive off when they were in.

Bert slipped out of the van and stood in the shade of the trees checking for onlookers. No one close. There would be witnesses, That was bad, but he'd be quick and they weren't close enough to care about. One was a kid anyway. He nodded back to the driver who started the engine and slipped on a balaclava. Bert pulled on his own balaclava and stepped out. It was six steps and Bert could move quickly when he had to.

"Any noise and I slice your backbone." Bert deliberately drove the knife in a way to leave Mrs Roland in no doubt that he meant business. He heard a gratifying gasp of surprise and pain.

But Megan had not attended self defence classes for almost a year to be snatched by an idiot in a mask. Regretting her lack of high heels her shoe slammed down on Bert's foot, her elbow hurtled back into his midriff. She threw herself forward and around and her hand driven by the momentum of her whole body swung a vicious arc to end in a karate chop under Bert's nose driving it up towards his forehead and turning his eyes into seas of water. The knife jabbed briefly but neither Megan nor Bert was really aware of it. Megan remembered she was supposed to be shouting and let out a blood curdling yell for help. But she was free. The only thought left to her was that she could not take on a knife wielding man alone, but there was someone who would. She ran for the office. Bert, through the pain and surprise was aware that he was not having a good week. For the second time he was having difficulty dealing with one stupid female. At that point rational thought stopped. The cow was running away, easily catchable, in front of him and so casting away common sense he set off after her. Only when he realised that she was getting further away did Bert gather himself enough to see that he was sprinting in broad daylight across a public lawn after a shrieking woman. Then, to make matters worse Lanell came into sight running like an Olympic champion straight at him.

Behind him Bert heard the van motor rev as the vehicle departed, using its acceleration to slam the door. Panic was all that was left to him. He threw down the knife and fumbled the gun out of his pocket. In front of him Mrs Roland and Lanell passed each other.

Gasping for air, Megan slithered to a stop and turned. Mac was running straight at the thug, but god, her attacker had got out a hand gun and was raising it and lining it up in front of his face, with Mac running straight down the line of sight.

Giving a cry of horror Megan began to sprint back. She had no idea what she could do and she would be too late but she would be there.

Mac was oblivious to everything except the gun and the target of this man's stomach just below it. A subconscious message was telling him that he would fell this man even if he was dead when he did it. He waited as long as he dared then tucked his head out of the way and threw himself down into a forward roll that should carry him under the bullet. No shot sounded. As his feet hit the ground again and as he came back up, he felt a thump on his left shoulder and heard the report of the gun. Thrusting that same shoulder forward, his last thought before he struck was that if he had a bullet lodged in there he should not be using the shoulder as a battering ram.

Running hard behind him Megan saw the roll the shot and then the numbing impact as Mac buried his body into Bert's stomach. Bert's stomach contents flew up into his diaphragm which in turn punched the air out of his lungs in a small explosive burst, and a moment later he hit the ground like a deflated balloon. For a few precious seconds Bert was completely incapacitated. He returned to reality to find a gasping Mac sitting astride him holding his wrists and the bloody Roland woman picking up his gun. Out of the corner of his eye Mac watched Megan remove the magazine, check that there were bullets and reset and cock it. Then holding it two handed at arms length she pointed

it safely but ominously close at some soft ground just short of Bert.

"Roll off him," Megan instructed. "I can shoot his eyes out one at a time from this distance."

Mac appreciated that the tough talk and show of gun skills were exactly what the situation called for. The man on the grass lay deathly still. Truly Mrs Roland was a scary woman of many parts.

"Stand back", Megan called as a crowd began to gather. "If he tries to get up I can't be responsible for the ricochet." The onlookers hurried back making welcome extra room, but even the thug on the ground sniggered at the idea that the light hand gun Megan held was going to cause havoc bouncing bullets off grass.

The numerous cell phones made numerous calls to the police, and so they waited.

Still holding the gun steadily pointing just short of Bert's vital organs, Megan asked, "Why aren't you dead Mr Lanell?"

Mac had been inspecting the torn and bloodied shoulder of his shirt.

"Shallow flesh wound," Mac told her.

The siren stopped just beyond the hedge and the same young faced cop from two nights before joined them. "Yes it's these two again," he thought. Whoever they were they had friends in high places. Just clean up after them, don't ask too many questions and let the big boys sort it out.

Mac pointed to the man on the ground. "Several witnesses saw this man holding a knife to Mrs Roland and shooting at me."

The young policeman hurriedly handcuffed the suspect, grateful that the fearsome Mrs Roland moved the line of fire a little further away while he did it. Shit, the damn woman was armed. Surely he wasn't allowed to let her get away with that, even if she had important friends? "Is that your gun ma'am?"

Megan felt the tension draining. She had not realised how rigid she had been until she relaxed her grip on the gun. She removed the magazine to hand it to him. "No it's our friend's. Sorry about the fingerprints but we needed it."

The young policeman breathed a sigh of relief and bagged it up, made routine enquires about any injuries, was informed that there were none, advised witnesses to be available for questioning and was grateful to be on his way again.

Wendy, who had arrived not long after Mac when she heard the shouting, knew that there are times with even the very strong require mollycoddling. She firmly took control and with an arm around each she herded Mac and Megan back towards their rooms. Behind her she heard Hemi's firm voice assuring everyone they were quite safe now, thanking guests who had assisted the police, and offering to serve drinks for anyone with unsettled nerves.

Megan shook herself back to activity. She had responsibilities. "Make it a free drink for the traumatised, Hemi." Laughs and a smattering of applause greeted the announcement. Free drinks or not, the guests at the Moho were delighted to see their host back in charge again. Megan tried half heartedly to break free of Wendy's grip but Wendy took her in hand again and Megan allowed herself to be led back to the main block.

In Mac's room the women cut off his shirt, examined his wound and told him he should see a doctor, but weren't surprised when he refused. There was a long bloodied and bruised groove on Mac's shoulder which Megan began to tend with her usual quiet efficiency. But once she and Wendy had cleaned around the wound and staunched most of the bleeding, Wendy said brightly, "Hemi will be up soon from dealing with the guests. The guys can finish dressing this themselves. Megan, come with me to your room. You need soothing."

Megan flashed her a hostile look. "I think Mac's needs are greater, don't you Wendy?"

Using her body to shield her hand from Mac, Wendy turned a blood stained palm towards Megan. Megan recognised defeat. If she protested further Wendy would have to tell the injured Mac about her and he had had enough excitement today. She satisfied herself that Mac had his cut clean and that Hemi would have what he needed to be able to dress it, and backed out the door. "Back as soon as I can escape Wendy," she said. Mac, who had been rather enjoying the attentions of his lovely

hostess was disappointed that she was to be replaced by Hemi, but understood that Megan's experience's had been as bad as his own and that she should have some female support even if it came from a woman she disliked.

In her room Megan didn't need to be told to lie face down on her bed while Wendy cut open the back of her ruined dress. "Why didn't you say something you stupid mutt," Wendy said angrily. "Mac would have noticed any time now and forgotten about his own injury, and how would that have helped?"

"That consideration is the only reason that I am lying here half naked being abused by the nurse from hell, while the man who risked his life to protect me is dressing his own wound."

Wendy swiftly cleaned Megan's back. "Be thankful it was a very sharp knife. It is a deep cut but it closes up perfectly. Megan, I won't call an ambulance as long as you promise to let me dress it again tomorrow and use my judgement then, ok?"

"Yes ok, doctor Askey. Shit that stings. Finish me up, we have a patient over the hall." There was no doubt that Wendy was being as helpful and as kind as she knew how, but that didn't lessen the foulness of how she behaved. Helpless as she was, now was the time to have it out. "Wendy, how can you do it. How can you be so disloyal to Mac?"

Wendy was shocked. It seemed that every time she had slipped off early or been a bit careless over a job in the office, or even the fun that she was having at the Moho came back to haunt her, for she was a very conscientious woman. "I work pretty hard really," she said defensively. "Mac's fairly happy with the work I do for him, or at least he says he is."

Megan puzzled over that for a moment. "Not the office. In bed. Mac's a loyal brave person. Shit, he risked death for me this afternoon. That makes me feel something for him and you are treating him like a sex toy."

It was Wendy's turn to pause and wonder. "Sex toy. Mac? I think you've lost me Megan."

And then the amazing truth began to dawn for her. "Oh good grief no! You think I'm his dirty weekend, well week really, don't you?" and she began to snort. "Oh Megan, you are so good for my self esteem. That's what this has been about isn't it? You think I'm having an affair with Mac."

Wendy gave Megan a whack on her backside uncomfortably close to the wound she had just dressed. "The gorgeous Megan Roland has been pissed off with Wendy bloody Askey because Wendy is bonking her knight in slightly tarnished armour. Oh Megs I love it. I will never feel inadequate as a sex goddess ever again. But really I'd rather eat worms. No, that wouldn't be fair on the worms. I think I can say I'd rather go to bed with Mac than eat worms."

Megan, suffering both physical and emotional shock pressed her face down into the pillow and willed her life to fast forward a bit.

"But you kiss him and hug him and when you were hurt he moved heaven and earth to get you here safely."

"There are different sorts of love, Meg. I suppose Mac loves me as a very good friend and employee. I kiss and hug my dad, but I don't sleep with him. Not since I was about three anyway, and that was because there was a bogeyman under my bed."

Wendy saw Megan's body stiffen and thought of the pain she must be feeling, but had no idea of the emptiness that swept Megan at the idea that fathers could be kissed and hugged and gave protection to three year olds against their bogeymen.

Unable to meet Wendy's eye, Megan got stiffly off the bed and into a fresh undamaged dress.

There was an urgent tapping on the door. There were calls to wait while Megan straightened her clothing and kicked the bloodstained remains of her previous dress under the bed. Mac came in.

"God, Megan, where was my brain. You were hurt weren't you?" I saw you sprinting around like a gazelle and it didn't occur to me he got to you too."

"A scratch, nothing more," said Megan dismissively."

Mac turned to Wendy for confirmation. Wendy shook her head. "More than a scratch but she is

treated with the very best arnica, taped up, and I have a promise that she goes to the doctor if I say so tomorrow. Oh, and Mac, it's ok our affair is out in the open." Wendy put her hands on Mac's shoulders and when he flinched she moved them quickly to his hips. "She knows everything." Mac backed against the wall. "What are you doing?"

From the doorway Hemi said in a low growl, "Wendy?"

It was not as funny as she hoped. With Hemi glowering at the door, Megan on her other side looking daggers at her and Mac's puzzled embarrassment, Wendy swapped, men. "Alas the monkey won't have me, back to the organ grinder."

Megan smiled at Hemi over Wendy's head. "A joke at our expense Hemi. It's ok. I'll deal with her later."

"That's odd, it felt like a joke at my expense," said Mac.

That evening was rather more riotous than Megan and Mac would have liked. They circulated freely to allay fears that anyone was hurt and in the hope that it would seem that nothing much had happened. In fact there were only three actual witnesses to the early action and it didn't take much to convince everyone else that all was well. Wine flowed to encourage guests to feel they were still having a good time despite bullets and knives on the back lawn. Megan fended off a myriad of well wishers who wanted to tell her how brave she was and in one corner a rather tiresome seven year old who unfortunately was one of the three real witnesses trained every child to rush at a toy gun wielding youngster and do a forward roll before knocking him over. Eventually unable to stand it any longer Mac sought Megan's permission to throw customer relations to the winds and sent them to play outside even though they were convinced the lawns were awash with armed murderers. Eileen, who had heard the shot and assumed a car back firing, listened to the story in astonishment. She was a little less astonished but startled to see Hemi clinging possessively to Wendy. She had no idea what to feel when several times during the evening Megan pressed against Mac to say something private and he put an arm round her. Twice Mac dropped a gentle kiss on the top of her head.

Mac was in turmoil. He had yet to establish Megan's innocence. He hadn't received an invitation to meet Hugh and police preparations to pick up Hugh were underway. But it was clear that the day had changed things. It was more than the attack on the lawn. Something had happened while the women were together. He needed to talk to Wendy.

The wine had flowed. "Remind me why I was sexually harassed this afternoon," he said putting an arm around Wendy who grinned impishly as Hemi and Megan stiffened in their chairs.

"I had reason to believe that the huge and ill concealed passion you hold for me would respond to my..." Wendy broke off to perform a coquettish toss of her head, "... seductive ways."

Megan couldn't stand to hear what was coming next. She jumped up and winced as the muscles in her back went tight. She gripped Wendy's arm. "Mac, there is something I need to discuss with you – in private - about tomorrow. And I will confess to a wee misunderstanding which is amusing Wendy out of all proportion to its significance." The last words were directed at Wendy in a snarl. Wendy giggled. Mac was not a lot wiser but very happy. It seemed the women were quarrelling over him, and surely Megan was talking about the meeting with Hugh tomorrow. He looked at Megan but she refused to catch his eye.

The excitement slowly died and the guests drifted away. Hemi and Wendy helped with the early packing up and then were gone. Megan and Mac escorted Eileen home. No one commented that they walked hand in hand. When the good-nights had been said and the door closed behind Eileen, Megan looked up at Mac. There were not many men that Megan looked up to either in thought or act, but this one was tall and had earned her respect.

"I haven't properly thanked you for coming to my rescue." she said.

"Actually it's my job, but I had no intention of letting any other man take you away anyway," Mac

replied.

It had been a safe game for Megan to play. If Mac simply accepted her thanks then she had not offered herself. But it was not to be.

Their lips came together as they spoke. Megan had read but never believed that there were stars in moments of passion, but now the already warm and cheerful night became a brilliant pool of heat and turmoil, yet at the same time it became darker and more intimate. For a desperate and mindless minute their mouths and tongues explored the desire of the other. Eventually they pulled apart a little breathlessly.

Mac searched his vocabulary for the right words to express this moment of surrender. "Wow," he said."

By silent agreement they walked back to Megan's room but at the door Mac stopped. You are a married woman Meg and a suspect whom I am employed to investigate.

Megan turned to look into his face. "Does that prevent you from talking to me?"

"No, but is that all that will happen if I go in there?"

For answer Megan turned and walked into her room leaving the door open. "No," she said.

Mac followed her in, and locked the door.

Mac doubted that anyone would ever know Mrs Megan Roland thoroughly but he had learned a little and he was sensitive enough to realise that Megan had taken a huge emotional risk. Rejection would have shattered her. But she was quite safe. Even though he knew this was quite wrong, there was no way that it would not happen. He was way out of line, but he was beaten by what he felt. He turned her towards himself and his hands travelled down the front of her clothing opening buttons, clasps and zips from top to bottom. He peeled her as he would a ripe fruit but the white flesh revealed was so much more. It was unnerving but with a soft smile of surrender and contentment she simply let him continue. Somehow that passive slide into sex meant more to him than an overt display would have.

When she was naked he lowered her backwards onto the bed. With time to look, he marvelled, at how much female shape she could pack onto such a slender frame. Her body shouted woman to the lusty man in him. His mouth and tongue explored across her breasts and downwards becoming more intimate and desperate as they travelled.

Until now Megan had been quiescent, even passive, but gently she roused and began to moan and move to the caressing pressure. He separated her legs. His hands stroked her long slender thighs while his tongue stimulated her most sensitive organ. Megan rose to heights that she didn't know existed. This was the sex she had fantasized about but not believed herself capable of. Anticipation rose towards a peak when Mac grappled with the condoms she had produced. Almost as soon as they touched again she went off into spasms of orgasmic delight that left her only slightly aware of Mac gasping and moaning on top of her. For several minutes they clung together too weak and bewildered from the strength of their passion to speak.

Finally Mac struggled to take his weight off her. "You are a most extraordinary fabulous woman Megan," he said giving her a light affectionate kiss on the lips. Absolutely all woman and always fabulous.

Megan tried for a gentle put down but only came up with a silly grin and a sigh.

Megan felt herself becoming uncertain again. Her sex life had always been one of following not leading. With only the few groping encounters in cars and grubby bedrooms, straight to Hugh's casual couplings once a month and then less often, she was sexually naïve, particularly in view of what had just happened. Should she get dressed now? Tell Mac to go. Offer him her bed? Or wait for more. Her previous experience suggested that it was all over, but that didn't feel quite right for this.

Mac detected her uncertainly and acted. He bundled her in to his arms. "Please just lie here and let me look at you. The night's warm."

Megan lay back on the bed. Strangely she accepted and enjoyed it. She hadn't in the past. Although

she had always believed that she was a very beautiful woman she had never felt really at home with her naked body. Now that it really mattered to her that this man know and like all of her, she had the confidence she wished for. Mac's tongue and mouth began to move over hers and she responded. As his hands and face moved further down her, her body reacted as if this time it was more ready and expectant. The sex was slower and more loving, less intense, but the gratification was even greater. The feeling of release and satisfaction was total. For the first time in her almost 29 years, she knew what it meant to be sated without regret.

They lay together in each other's arms flesh to flesh caressing and nuzzling. At last Mac said, "you promised me a talk about Wendy's odd behaviour."

"I thought you were lovers. Wendy found that hilarious."

"She would. I'm surprised she didn't say she would rather eat worms and then retract for the sake of the worms. It's a habit of hers."

"She said that."

Mac chuckled. I love her to death but sex with Wendy would be like bedding my mother. Actually Wendy has a pretty good idea of how I feel about you and thinks we're made for each other. I think the way she expressed it was that we are both materialistic, fascist, cannibals. She was quite sympathetic about my reluctance to go when I dealt with the cold water attack in your shower."

Megan sprang up and yelped as the muscles in her injured back pulled tight. "You told her about that?"

"She's a trusted employee involved in an investigation. I keep her up to date"

"And she needs to know that I have showers?"

"Yes, we treat suspects who don't have showers differently. We stand further away."

Megan chuckled and gave Mac a playful prod. "I seem to have passed the test."

"Yes, but I did have to check."

"Mac, I think this will surprise you, but I've had a message from Hugh."

"No I'm not surprised. What are you going to do?"

Megan thought about Mac's response for a moment. Damn it she would not let it stir her up. "Mac, what did he say?"

"Follow me from the Happy Hamburger," Mac braced himself for the storm to follow. He felt the warm glow drop away from the beauty beside him to be replaced by the chill that he knew so well. He decided on attack as the best defence. "Meg, if you had gone alone you would have been in danger. The police had to follow as closely as they could and take Hugh at the first opportunity. You could not have talked with Hugh and you would have messed up my investigation for the bank. By telling me and cooperating we have two hours to see if there is anything to save."

"We! Cooperate! Police following! Mac what is this? I thought I could trust you."

"No Megan, until this afternoon we were investigating officer and suspect. Sometime while we were dodging bullets and knives we started trusting. When you told me about Hugh's message; that was trust. When I agreed that I'd seen it. That was trust. Megan, the banks trusted Hugh when they gave him tens of millions of dollars. That is the trust that I have to think of first."

Megan willed herself to be reasonable and accept that what Mac said was true, but the truth still hurt. "My car is full of tracking devices and you were going to follow, weren't you?"

Mac's attempt at levity failed. "No not at all, there are only two, and they are very small. They hardly take up any space."

Into the miserable silence that followed he said, "Meg, I have police agreement that if I am invited along they will give me two hours to deal with it before they move in, and if they believe we are safe they will leave it to my discretion. I swear that I can work it so that if we are not threatened you can see Hugh and he will not be arrested. I'd like to say it was out of respect for you and Hugh but it is for the money. Thirty million is worth more than Hugh in prison. The banks and politicians have forced the police to hold off, and believe me there are some very unhappy police out there."

"Get into bed you conniving scoundrel. We have a big day tomorrow." Anxiously Megan waited to

see if Mac would leave the room and was annoyed at the level of her joy when he assumed he was welcome to stay and joined her under the sheets. Megan turned away from him and he took the opportunity to draw her firmly towards him and settled to sleep.

Saturday:

Wendy woke happy. The big lug was showering. The jug was boiled in the service area. No one had told her she had to go back to Wellington and perhaps Hemi could stay on and do some jobs.

Wendy was realistic enough to know that things could go wrong but so far they were going comfortably right. She could tell Hemi whatever was on her mind and get sympathy and support and not derision. She had listened to his hopes and doubts and she wanted to be with him while he pursued his dreams. She wasn't absolutely certain that she was one of them yet, but she would damn well enjoy finding out.

She wasn't supposed to have been out in the corridor at night, but she couldn't help checking on Mac's room. It had stayed empty all night. He was keeping a very close eye on the job.

Mac and Megan woke happy but strained. The day held too much for even new lovers not to be distracted from their love making. They held each other briefly but both knew that passion, if it was to return would have to wait. Megan had to get the day at the Moho started and Mac had to prepare a dangerous and delicate mission which he now dreaded because it would expose Megan to god knew what.

It was well outside Hemi's job brief to help run the Moho but with Megan away on a Saturday morning he was needed. His crowd control and calming influence of the previous day had been noticed by everyone. He assured the other three that he had holidays owing from work and he would stay to see things out.

Mac briefed Wendy. She was needed to monitor the tracking. Sick fear was building. He could no longer even pretend to himself that he was sending the criminal's wife off to meet her criminal husband and if they got into strife then that was no loss to anyone. He was sending the woman he loved to a man he respected and feared. He should be concerned that they would be discussing the money that he had to get back. But he was losing that as a motive. And a bitter pill was that he was sending Megan to talk to the man who had shared her bed for nearly ten years. A gnawing resentment ate at him. But this was his job and it was his fault if he was emotionally involved. He simply had to get the money back and possibly dob in the criminals. It had always been fairly straight forward in the past. Megan wasn't helping. He wanted to rage at her, but only because she was back to doing what she did so well - running the Moho. Brightly polite and smiling to the guests. And brightly polite and smiling to him as well. Last night hadn't happened and later that morning was just another task along the way. He wanted to take her by the shoulders and shake her and rage at her, but damn the woman, she was just dealing with it in her own way. It was what made her strong. Last night he had seen her passionate side and he would see it again.

Shortly after 9:30, Mac slipped into the passenger seat of Megan's car. As he expected she drove with quiet confidence. There was nothing to say. Megan and Mac made casual comments to each other but after a while the tension became unbearable and they fell silent.

It was only ten minutes to ten when they arrived. The car park of the Happy Hamburger was open to the main road. Megan pulled up and they sat watching for red cars in the car park and outside. Red cars came and went. 27CRK, 898UIO, sometimes a custom plate. IMASTAR went past. When BLOND appeared they both reacted, but it was more brown than red and didn't slow as it raced off towards Otaki. Then an ageing red Honda 672KER moved onto the road edge apparently letting faster traffic go by. Megan started the engine.

"Oh god. That's it. I really didn't think he'd remember." She was so stirred that Mac waited until she had got under way and calmed herself. "672 was a joke. I said we needed a favourite number and

Hugh said that 672 was available. So really just to tease him I told people we had it as our number. That was years ago but he remembered.”

It seemed to Mac that remembering a family joke about a number was not much to get excited about, but Megan's reaction suggested it was a rare and significant thing. He was uncomfortably aware that he was peeved at the thought of any romantic attachment to the woman next to him, playful or not. “KER?” he asked

“Kermit frog. We had a Kermit week in one of the hotels and he was a bit of a favourite of mine. I said I expected 672 of them to make our favourite number. Hugh was quite sweet about trying to figure out how to do it, but in the end I had to settle for about 200.” Megan became aware that Mac was becoming grimly quiet at these romantic musing. “Are you jealous of my Kermit?”

“Let it alone Meg.”

Megan felt she had some troubled waters to calm. “Actually it was about the only cute thing we ever shared,” she said, and then realised with dismay that that was too close to the truth.

They had left Waikanae behind and the red Honda signalled left. They both tensed and made the turn.

They continued on past some semi-rural houses and out on to a farm lane.

“Hold it, stop, stop,” Mac said urgently.

Megan, conscious of the alarms and transmitters that Mac had with him, did as she was told.

Mac had no intention of putting Megan or himself to this sort of risk. “I'm employed to protect you not to watch you drive off into ambush country.”

Megan was suddenly near tears of frustration. “We can't just let it go.”

“Forget it Meg. Turn the car and be ready to leave fast.”

Megan was tempted to rebel and even contemplated running for it.

Mac's quiet voice said, “The first sign that this is going wrong and I radio for support. The police promised to be no more than 10 minutes away.”

They waited.

The red Honda came back around the corner. And a bright young curly headed man popped a head out the window. “I thought you guys were following me.”

“Tell your boss we will not be isolated down rural roads. Find somewhere public.”

“Ah, he's not far now,” said curly, waving back down the road.

“Good, then he won't mind coming back here,” Mac said brusquely.

The Honda turned and disappeared around the corner again.

“He's so close Mac. Let me go to him,” Megan pleaded.

“He's holed up amongst the sand dunes probably with a four wheel drive, possibly with a helicopter. He will have planned an escape that might include an armed gang and hostages. Stay put.”

Time passed and the red Honda joined them again.

“Wow this is weird. Are you spies or something? He gave a headset to Megan.”

Mac sat and waited while Megan talked. The conversation sounded much too friendly and casual to the highly strung Mac. Megan occasionally looked across at him and made a response. “He promised the police would be no closer than ten minutes and not move in until noon, not at all if everything is ok,” Megan was saying. After a pause she handed the set to Mac.

“I'm about to do the most stupid thing of my life,” a voice said. “Follow the kid. If you don't betray me no one will be hurt and you will get the money you're chasing. If this is an ambush I will make sure the first person hurt is Megan and just in case my information is incorrect and that doesn't worry you, the next will be you. It's entirely up to you whether we all finish this as rich friends or poor corpses.”

Mac handed the headset back to the curly youngster who talked briefly and then drove back towards the main road. Their route included some diversions and doubling back before the car entered the carpark of a small famlet and coffee bar. Mac had to marvel at the skill of the choice. There was

somewhere to sit. It was publicly placed in a town street to allay Mac's fear, yet backed onto open ground for an escape route for Hugh. It had partly concealed places where a private conversation could take place and it could not easily be approached secretly by assailants. Hugh must have had this in mind as a fall back location all along. They took a place on the outside deck where surprise was harder.

Mac arranged for Megan to sit against a wall section and beside a pillar. It wasn't much but it would make a kidnap attempt more difficult. Mac was desperately aware that the toy gun and throwing knife he carried were not going to do him much good out here. The toy gun was for bluff. In gun free New Zealand he could not carry a loaded firearm to a meeting. He could be in more trouble than the criminals if he drew it. The knife was also illegal but more acceptable. In Mac's hands it was a fatal weapon at up to twenty metres, but here among fields and sand its use was limited. Curly youth was having the time of his life."I have some money to buy you a coffee, what would you like?"

"No, I'd like you to sit here and keep an eye out for our host," Mac said.

"I'll get something for myself then," said the irrepressible youth.

Mac grasped his arm firmly. "No you won't. Sit." It was cruel and harsh but Mac was thinking that if there was any sort of attack, - and Hugh would be very stressed when he came in – the youth would be an effective addition to the shields he had arranged.

A burly man wearing unseasonably heavy clothing came and sat sipping a drink between them and the car park. Another large man dressed strangely for a fun farm was inspecting plants out on the lawn.

Beyond him a man wearing a brimmed hat and large dark glasses was moving in from a neighbouring property. Mac touched Megan's arm but she was already looking. "Yes," she said softly."

"I got this job through Student Job Search the young man announced. This is huge. Twenty dollars an hour. And the guy who told me what to do said if I did well I could keep the car." The last was said with such feeling that both Megan and Mac felt their faces twitch. They both realised that getting the car and using it with false plates would have posed a risk that Hugh did not want. To be able to dispose of it quickly at the end of the job would reduce his difficulties.

Hugh passed the man on the lawn without acknowledgement. He walked freely and confidently. Mac could image how his eyes would be scanning behind the dark glasses, and how he would be measuring the body movements of his wife and Mac as he approached. A casual observer saw only a big man looking for his family or friends. Hugh swung a leg over the fence, crossed the eatery deck and dropped onto a seat beside the youth. "Go and buy a coffee and a bun," Hugh said, "and stay away a while. No, buy us all a coffee and bun, then give us twenty minutes. You've done very well."

With Hugh blocking most of the view ahead Mac felt they were about as safe as they could be. Hugh would not do his own dirty work.

Hugh squeezed Megan's hand. "Good to see you Meg. You are as lovely as ever. First some unpleasantness and then I hope we can be pleasant. I risked coming here because I believe I can trust the two of you. But still, I feel like that damn cowboy who had to get back to the tavern for one last kiss and ended up lying full of holes on the floor. Because I have come under your conditions I expect them to be met. There will be no violence unless I'm betrayed. If I am betrayed there will be repercussions. I have some conditions of my own. You will not leave here until noon. It's a very nice place to be and I have friends to keep an eye on you."

Mac nodded agreement. He assured Hugh that there would be no violence from them and no attempt at capture. They wanted to hear what he had to say.

"Now to the pleasant part." Hugh used a lighter tone and a smile to change the mood. He put out a hand towards Megan. "A kiss for the errant husband from his lovely wife."

Megan put her hands on Hugh's arms to hold him back and glanced briefly at Mac. She relented and leaned forward to peck him on the cheek.

It had been a test. Hugh made a little grimace. "My information appears to be correct that you need Mr Lanell's permission before you kiss your husband Meg."

Megan dropped her eyes to the table top in silent acknowledgement.

"I'm disappointed but not dismayed. I could not see how I could be an adequate husband to you for some time to come. In fact I never was an adequate husband to you was I?"

Megan was finding this so much harder than expected. She hadn't known how she would feel having Hugh with her again, but whatever she had expected it was not this trapped feeling in front of two men who captured her emotions in such different ways. "I was young. There were lots of good times. I don't blame you Hugh."

The automatic excuse told Mac more than any agreement or contemptuous retort could have done.

"There was sexual and marital dysfunction was what there was, Megan," Hugh said. "You want to be free?"

"Yes Hugh, I want to be free."

Both Hugh and Megan noticed Mac's involuntary gasp, but both chose to ignore it.

"I made a mistake with you Meg and I'm sorry for it." I needed a classy wife to show off at business functions but you were too good for that. You learned too much too quickly to be a bimbo. Then when we came to New Zealand I thought you would be comfortable at home and that you would be happy with a pretend marriage and an accommodation unit to run, but you were always too good. I found I had a business partner and a woman to be my wife and quite honestly Meg I didn't want either. I wanted a show piece airhead. I don't do partners either marital or business very well.

I'm boring Mr Lanell and we haven't much time. I have a proposition that will meet all our needs.

Megan, you will be a widow, I will be gone and the money that concerns Mr Lanell will be safe.

Mac I think you know where my money is and what it is doing. In a week or so Eastgate will get the go ahead and very soon after will be available for sale as an active development worth twice the value of the investment to date. Frankly I overreached myself. The investment was and still is good, the hold ups have made things difficult. The money I used to finance the deal was always safe. No one minds a thief who steals and then gives back more than they stole and that is what I shall do but it has taken too long and now I am attacked by both the law and others outside the law. I need time to proceed with the construction. Therefore I propose.... Shit, do not move away from where you are."

Hugh was on his feet swiftly but without flurry and striding towards the back fence. Several customers including the men in heavy clothes gently repositioned themselves. In the car park two policemen slid out of their patrol car and came towards the shop. Megan and Mac watched anxiously as the scene unfolded. Hugh had gracefully exited over the back fence and was admiring the farmlet as he put distance between himself and them. The police chatted to the shop assistant and strolled through to the outside deck. Briefly the gaze of one of the police rested on Megan and Mac as the other nodded and smiled to patrons. A young child who recognised his uncle in uniform tried to climb his leg and was laughingly set aside. Satisfied that the law was being upheld and rioting had not broken out in a family coffee bar in Waikanae, the two police made their way back to their car. Three tables away from Megan and Mac, the curly headed young man finished his fourth bun and licked his fingers. He had never had so much money and such a cushy job.

The tension died like a gently deflating balloon. Several customers glanced at each other and returned to doing what they were doing. Mac struggled to identify the ones that simply tensed in the presence of the police and those who had reached for weapons or moved closer to fight or run.

Silently fuming Mac swore to give Detective Murray Ransfield a piece of his mind. God, how could they have been so stupid.

Hugh again gracefully straddled the back fence. Under a calm exterior he was furious. "What the fuck was that Lanell?"

“Truly I do not know. It might have been coincidence. It might just be overzealousness, but I did not know of it.” Mac held out his arms in a gesture of surrender. “If it had been a raid on you they would have used plain clothes first and the uniforms would have stayed and not driven off.”

Hugh calmed a little. “I’ve had enough. You get the story fast, then you take my wife home and keep her safe and I get out of here.”

“A while back, when I still thought I could work with Sum, one of his thugs had an unfortunate accident while trying to kill me. In another couple of days a decayed and eaten body will come ashore. It will have some papers of mine on it. According to a Gisborne dentist of casual professional standards the body’s teeth will match the dental records of Hugh Roland who has attended his surgery. Public announcements about the death of a major criminal will be made and his grieving wife will state publicly that she is struggling to get by with an accommodation unit bought with her own money, and barely enough cash to get through. There will be no further need for any interest in either me or Megan by Sum or the law.”

“When Eastgate is cleared for building an unknown investor working through a minor lawyer in south Auckland will decide to proceed and as soon as possible will sell the rights to complete and run a spectacularly well placed and designed, supermarket and commercial complex. The two closest retail centres have already said they will have to close if Eastgate goes ahead. Mr Lanell, having promised his bank employers that ultimately their money will come good will be the blue-eyed boy and even Mr Sum will be pleasantly surprised by cheques in the post.”

Hugh paused and studied Megan and Mac. This was the toughest part of an ambitious project. Neither Meg nor Mac were pushovers, but this could work and be the best for everyone if Lanell got the law off his back long enough to make good.

Mac stirred. “I’m going to need details and ways to contact you.”

Hugh took that as encouragement. “If you need me use Witherspoon. I’m sure that you know by now that the message agency uses only phones and temporary paper messages and is almost impossible to use for tracing. Once the pressure comes off I will be working through my Auckland lawyer who runs an interesting office in a similar way. I warn you that if the rest goes astray I will get as much of the money away as quickly as possible, and since I am already dead I will be very embarrassing to find or prosecute. I have a document here outlining what I have done and what we can achieve together. It is confidential to the two of you and your company, Mr Lanell. Please respect that.”

Hugh rose suddenly. I look forward to our future success. He stepped around the table towards Megan. Mac and Megan lurched back. “A last kiss, for in a few days I die.” Briefly his lips met his wife’s. “That was nearly as passionate as necking with my dog,” Hugh chuckled easily. “Megan, a final word with Mr Lanell if you please. Give this money to the young man over there. Tell him the car will be transferred into his name when the registration office opens on Monday and tell him that he must remove the registration plates before he goes home. The original ones are still underneath.” Reluctantly Megan took the money and the message to the curly headed youth.

Mac had prepared himself for a bitter tirade against Megan, the banks, the police, himself, anything but this. “Look after her. She’s not as tough as she pretends. And look out for yourself as well. She got a four million dollar deposit for that accommodation unit out of me and I’m proud of her for it. I too, know how to dip into people’s financial affairs and I think you will find it a little harder to keep up. There will be \$200,000 deposited into one of my accounts for which you will both get withdrawing rights. It will be a struggle for her without it and she wouldn’t accept it if I gave it to her directly. Pretend it’s yours if you like. You have both a funeral and wedding to pay for too. I expect a good funeral and she will expect a big wedding. Do better than I did in every way, and think hard about my scheme. I didn’t need to come here today. I could and should have just shifted that money back off shore and gone myself. I’m not like that Lanell. I’m a businessman, not a crook. And I needed to see her a final time and observe you two together. I believe you can make her happy. Congratulations for your wedding Mac, I regret I won’t attend. If you agree to my plan I’ll be

dead and if not I'll be spending other people's money somewhere nice." He smiled wryly. "You could say that I won't attend my funeral because I'll be alive, nor your wedding because I'll be dead."

While Mac searched for words to protest that looking after Hugh's troublesome wife was not part of the deal, Hugh slid out of his seat and was on his way.

Mac had to admire the grace of the man. He was moving back across the deck smiling at the patrons, stepping around the children, ignoring his guard at the back fence except for the merest of nods. And then he was off across the farmlet and into the sand dunes. A minute later the man in the heavy jacket by the back fence made his own casual exit the same way.

Megan and Mac filled in time awkwardly. Shortly before noon the other jacketed guard left through the front door and walked off down the street. Several early lunch guests slipped away, but which were paying customers and which were paid was hard to pick even with Mac's experience. The whole operation had not identified any patron or car except the one now owned by the clueless youth.

Mac sent the prearranged message on his cell phone and added. "We're all clear and going home. Ring you from the Moho."

"Make sure you do," was all he got from his not so friendly detective.

The trip home should have been a delight. Megan and Mac could have each other. They probably had the banks' money. They had survived a difficult and dangerous encounter. Even Hugh was probably safe, but human nature is perverse and unpredictable and it was not to be. Megan hated failure. Publicly and humiliatingly her marriage had collapsed and she had announced the fact to the man beside her. Well stuff him. She was not going to be passed around like a second hand bartered bride. She had her pride. That little private chat at the end while she was sent off like the servant to do the messages. She could just picture it. "Take her off my hands. She's just a woman in a big man's world. Make sure she doesn't screw up the Moho". And yet inside her another voice kept saying that she *did* need someone she trusted. She needed to be needed. And she needed someone who could arouse her as she had been aroused last night. She angrily attempted to ignore it. God she thought to herself. How desperate was she that she was chasing the investigator sent to put her and her husband in prison. And that, half an hour after her marriage finally crumbled in a humiliating public renunciation of each other. Anyway, now that he had used her to find Hugh and when he had discovered she wasn't about to hand over the Moho just because he was a man, he would be off for greener pastures like everyone else she had ever cared for. A flood of mixed emotions engulfed her and she hid in silence.

Beside her, Mac listened to her silence and it was louder than if she had shouted.

Mac was not used to feeling inadequate. He believed in himself and in a successful life. But now he bitterly realised that he could not expect Megan to drop willingly into his lap. Who did he think he was? While she had been a married woman with crime on her hands Mac could pursue her.

Pursuing her was his job and expected of him. But now he was trapped in a car with a newly separated woman who, at almost 29 years old was disgusting rich, highly competent, downright dangerous, and could turn any man on the planet into gibbering jelly. She would be considering her future at this moment and it would not include a small time investigator who had nearly managed to save the deposit on his first home. Yet professionally and emotionally he still could not step away from Megan Roland. He was committed to fighting for her and if necessary against her at any cost to his sanity or pride.

A feeling like physical pain passed through him. He had lost her the day he thought he had won her. Into the silence Mac said, "I wasn't expecting a tail and there isn't one. We can go straight home."

Megan heard the flat tones of a man no longer interested in her. At least they still had one thing in common. "Will they accept Hugh's idea?"

"I think they will. The money is still there and Hugh is right that as long as it comes back safe then investors won't ask what happened to it on the way. Morally bad, but understandable. It's no coincidence that fraud cases escalate when times are bad and money that would normally be safe comes unstuck."

Megan nodded. She had asked, but it was not what she wanted to talk about.

"I'll need to hang around for a while yet," Mac said.

Megan hid the thrill that went through her. "Yes you will." She risked a small smile.

Wendy pounced on them both when they returned. Megan hugged her and was grateful for an uncomplicated friend who welcomed her. To think that she had despised this woman because of an imagined relationship with a man she didn't much like anyway.

Wendy made sure they were safe. At least they hadn't returned with knife and bullet wounds this time but she didn't understand the two new lovers. In Wendy's world, if two people liked each other they got together. She was frankly puzzled by the glitch that had appeared just as things were going so well. Evidently Hugh had offered an end to the marriage and been accepted. That was good news. Loyalty was great but freedom when it meant no further pain and greater happiness was better. Something had happened while they were out that didn't seem to have anything to do with the investigation. She would just have to wait for the full briefing.

When Eileen heard of it she was not so comfortable with marriages that were set aside at a whim but her heart lifted to think that her young friend might find happiness with this man and that she might have neighbours she could respect again.

Megan as usual buried muddled emotions in her work. She tried to be everywhere and nowhere. She watched the guests for signs that they could not cope with shootings on the back lawn. Some left, but others came as usual. Guests wanted to talk to her about newspaper reports and stories they heard. Megan remained polite and friendly but pleaded work load and moved on as quickly as possible. Through it all, Eileen, Wendy and Hemi remained quietly strong. Hemi assured her he was going to use his week's leave here with Wendy. There was unspoken agreement that he was now an assistant manager of the Moho. Megan had no idea how he had adapted so quickly but she was too preoccupied to resist this peaceful incursion.

By ten o'clock Hemi had gone to settle some guests with a minor problem, saying he would not be back. Wendy was helping wind down activity in the kitchen. Mac was about to escort Eileen home. Looking pointedly at a spot on the wall Megan announced rather louder than she meant to that she would call it a night. "I expect you will need to be a pain over security as usual?" Even to Megan it sounded peevish and pathetic, but she had offered, in her own way. She would not do more. As she went up to her room Megan rejoiced in the feeling that people she cared for were doing the jobs she had always automatically taken on herself. This must be what it felt like to have real friends.

Once he came to her there was no longer a need to pretend. Mac and Megan explored the limits of their lust and eagerness. They released the stress of the long tense day. Shortly after midnight sated, moist and exhausted from the animal passion and its fluids Mac told Megan that he wanted to be with her every day and night. Megan struggled for the words that would express her longing for that sort of relationship but also leave her safe from future pain and humiliation. The words didn't come and she turned away and silently wept at her own inadequacy and fear. Beside her, Mac withered. The lovely Mrs Roland, now Ms Ambrel once again, was preparing to move on to more worthy prey.

Sunday:

Mac found Wendy in her bedroom office. He silently offered her Hugh's letter of the day before. "Read and be amazed," he said. Wendy read silently and quickly. What surprised her most was how loyal Hugh was to Megan but those were treacherous waters and she decided not to comment. He had moved on and made a decision to leave Megan behind. Wendy could see the wisdom of that. The thug at the Napier bank was a revelation. Hugh had sent a pretended agent of Mr Sum into a branch of the bank to alert them that he had borrowed from Sum, in an effort to get protection for Megan. Wendy gave a hoot of laughter. "It worked. The powers sent help to the damsel in distress. The poor woman got Mac Lanell to check her out in her shower,"

And again he had sent a thug to rough up Megan in her house to get her out of it, or to get protection for her at home. Without catching his eye Wendy mused out loud, "I wonder if he thought he would get her out of her house and into your bed?"

Mac pretended not to hear. "The gun on the back lawn however was real. That was Mr Sum's. So was the attack on you in our office," he said.

Wendy nodded silently. As Megan had the day before, Wendy wondered out loud, "will the banks accept his idea of going ahead with Eastgate?" Wendy was pretty sure the answer was yes but Mac needed to talk, and talk they did until Mac felt he had left Megan alone too long and went to find her.

Wendy heard the phone in Mac's room and picked it up before it could be diverted to the front office. Detective Ransfield would be coming to lunch and bringing the heads of two major banks. Mr Lanell and Mrs Roland were to make themselves available.

Lunch had none of the pressures of the meeting to follow. Wendy mercilessly arranged vegetarian meals regardless of what the older men had asked for.

"This is like going out to dinner with my wife," muttered Ransfield.

"Obviously a respectable humane woman much too good for you," laughed Wendy adding bean sprout salad to the plates on the table.

Mac wasn't at all sure that the dour Detective Ransfield would let that pass and braced himself for an explosion that didn't come.

"Yes, that's what she says," laughed Ransfield, tucking in to his quiche despite having asked for steak.

Pat Evans of All Australasia amused himself by comparing his dinner with something deposited in his lounge by his cat the previous evening. He ate it heartily nonetheless.

Megan put off the inevitable as long as possible, but with most of the other guests settled and happy she made her way to Mac to be introduced. The other men eyed her warily and exchanged glances when Mac put a proprietorial hand onto Megan's shoulder. So this was the lovely Megan Roland. A woman who married into big business at 19, was a company executive at 26, lived the high life, operated on the fringe of crime, fought and defeated gangsters on her back lawn, handled guns, ran a large business alone and turned the almost equally formidable Mac Lanell into a simpering wreck. When Megan offered her hand as introduction Pat took the opportunity to break some ice. "My wife stayed in one of your cabins about three months ago, she loved it here."

Accepting compliments and manipulating customers was what Megan did well. The aloof look dropped away like autumn leaves from a tree. "Mrs Evans, the bank manager's wife. Of course. I remember her well. You are a lucky man Mr Evans. She sang beautifully on karaoke night. I offered to employ her as cabaret. I think she was quite tempted." Megan laughed at the memory.

An urchin returning from the beach with his parents rushed up to the table and announced to everyone and no one, "Mrs Roland shot a man on the grass, pow, pow, and the police came and took him away and now we're all safe. She said so."

Megan gave an apologetic grimace to the group at the table and turned to the boy. "Well I don't shoot people any more, it's not nice, but I do tell people's mothers if they drop sand all over my

restaurant so go outside again and jump up and down until the sand comes off.” Outside the window the young rogue jumped about shouting, “pow, pow, pow,” until his bewildered parents came got him.

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Megan and the four men settled into an unused room in the main building. The conversation was brief. Although it was unorthodox they believed Hugh could pull it off and that there was nothing to gain by rushing things. Agreeing to accept Hugh's false death would ease the pressure in the short term and since the money was already locked in other accounts it would be no more or less accessible.

Finally Detective Ransfield stood up. “I think we agree that although it puts us all in a difficult position we should let the matter mature. We must keep complete confidence on what we know now and at some time in the future we will attempt to recover the defrauded funds with proper interest. In the meantime if there is any indication that Mr Roland is playing us false we will announce his death as a hoax and resume the investigation.” It was the best there was and the other men began to rise. “Gentlemen, I wonder if I might have a word with Mrs Roland alone?”

Megan paused on her way to the door.

Mac was too quick and angry to her defence. “She knows nothing more. There is nothing that can't be said to us all.”

“Mac, it's quite clear that you are now too close to the suspect.” He laid emphasis on the last word. If there is nothing to incriminate Mrs Roland then she is quite safe to talk to me. If there is more to know then we all fail in our duty if I do not question her more closely.”

Megan laid a hand on Macs arm. “He's quite right Mac. He can talk to me and clear the air. I want this.”

Ransfield asked Evans to stay as a witness. With very bad grace Mac allowed Harry Sutton to escort him out.

The door shut leaving only the dimmest residue of sound from the retreating men. Megan had seen enough of the world to know what was coming and was ready.

Ransfield could frighten hardened criminals when he needed to. The veneer of gentle guest fell away and the interrogating detective took its place. “Mrs Roland, forget the bullshit. There is only so much that even your seductive techniques can do for you. You have access to your husband and the money. We'll find both. Ten years for conspiracy in major fraud comes very hard for a woman with your background. Make it easier on yourself.”

Anxiously Pat put a restraining arm on the detectives arm. Ransfield shook it off.

Megan understood. He was simply trying to make her angry and destroy her self control. She could deal with this, but she was aware she was not taking it well and wondered why she was not calmer. How many times had would be lovers or disgruntled clients attacked her unfairly while she laughed it off as pathetic posturing. Something was different, and the difference was Mac Lanell. Damn the man.

She took a breath and calmed herself.

“I'm sorry to disappoint you detective but I do not know where my husband is living and as far as I know the money is in the trust accounts in Auckland that Mr Lanell has found. I know you have to do your job and find out if I am involved, but I am not. If this makes me a foolish dupe then that's what I am, but I did have a rather large establishment to run and I wasn't paying attention. I think that was a deliberate ploy of my husband's.”

It was exactly what Ransfield had come to believe but he had to make sure.

“So you lived with Roland while he worked out a fraud that netted the two of you thirty million and when it went wrong and the law started moving in you become the wide eyed innocent, shed the crook and swapped him for the investigator. He's in your bed in week one and you're right for another ten years luxury.”

Pat Evans was angry now He grabbed Ransfield's arm more firmly this time. "Leave it Murray, she's told you she had no part, there's no point in this."

Megan knew that she was getting close to breaking point. Damn him, she would not yell or cry in front of these men. Speaking of how she really felt was impossible, and anyway she didn't really know. Why not let the little grub believe what he wanted. And who really cared. Hugh was going to have his way. "No Pat, sit down and don't be fool. I have the Moho, I have enough money. I have Lanell out there somewhere being unpaid help. And when he's had enough there's a few thousand other men in the world to be going on with. I'm going to be successful in life and I don't need to steal money to do it, so go back to your bosses and their banks and tell them that Megan Ambrel is doing very nicely thank you, but damn it all she is not going to prison to massage your egos. OK?" Silently the men rose. Ransfield was tempted to tell Megan she was magnificent, but that could wait. Despite his earlier doubts, the woman had kept herself squeaky clean while surrounded by crime and its pressures. Gentle natured Pat Evans had had his respect for the lovely Ms Ambrel shattered and was filled with disgust. He lapsed into silence. Both men wondered what the future held for Mac Lanell, but they had quite different views on that, because Ransfield had the training to detect lies. While Mrs Roland had been denying complicity in financial fraud she could look her interrogator in the eye. While she denied Mac and declared she could live with any man, she had talked to the carpet.

In his room, Mac let the earpiece drop onto his desk and stared dumbly after it. What a narrow escape he had had.

Afternoon tea was a mix of many people and diverse emotions. Megan flirted with Mac to prove a point to the other men. Mac grimly put up with it, too shocked to defend himself. Murray Ransfield sought out Wendy and commiserated with her over the beating she had had. They then talked quietly and happily for a while. Eileen joined the group and her obvious affection for Megan relaxed Pat a little. There must be something other than grasping evil to a woman who could entertain the old spinster. The three men finished their visit, admonished Megan and Mac to continue to take care and departed for town.

Pat felt he had betrayed a decent man. "God we need to warn Mac."

Ransfield laughed, "He's been shot at and attacked and so has his lover and his assistant, how many warnings does he need?"

"No I mean he needs to protect himself from that woman."

"You're just jealous she's not after you," hooted Ransfield. "The lovely Mrs Roland, now Ms Ambrel is protecting her dignity. A certain sort of person would rather deny the one they love than confess to loving them. "Did you expect a woman like that to fall sobbing on the table saying that No! No! she really loves this man and wants to live with him forever making babies. But she does," he added knowingly."

Pat Evans had visions of tarantulas mating.

The evening which began with such hopes for Megan turned into one of misery. How she wanted to relive the two previous nights but also to be able to tell Mac how it felt to be with someone who cared for her and with whom she felt safe and loved. She could do it. She practised the words. She knew they weren't enough and she couldn't get it quite right but it would work when they were alone together. But Mac was distant all evening and to her dismay, when she set off early to bed he reminded her to lock and bar the door as they were still in danger, particularly before Hugh's death was announced.

Biting back tears, Megan asked if he wouldn't be checking on her.

"I've allowed myself to get a little too casual in a professional relationship," Mac said, "I'm sure you understand we must keep a little distance. The width of the corridor will do."

Megan blinded by despair muttered that she felt quite safe with him across the corridor and fled

upstairs before tears could take over.

Wendy blazing with anger was a rare and magnificent sight. "What the hell was that, Mac Lanell? That woman cares about you deeply and you just dismissed her like a troublesome servant. Go up and find her and comfort her."

Mac's fury was no less marvellous. "I can't recall asking for an opinion, perhaps because I don't need one. I have friends I don't need Judas's."

"And in what way is she a Judas? I seem to remember her holding a gun to save your worthless carcass and then making sure you were safe and cared for while she bled from a deep wound."

That gave Mac some moments of discomfort, but he remembered the words in his earpiece. "If you want to know what our Mrs Roland needs from me then you go and comfort her yourself and ask her while you're there. It could be she's just lost some cheap staff."

Outside Megan's room Wendy tapped and called.

A voice from within said, "It's ok, Wendy, I just want an early night and I need to keep my door locked. I'll see you in the morning."

"It's not ok Megan, you're crying. It's ok to cry. I felt like crying when I saw how Mac treated you. Let me in or I'll go down and shout across the restaurant to Mac that he's made you cry and he has to come and fix it himself."

The door opened. "I'm not crying. I don't cry over stupid men."

"Nope just leaking a bit. It happens to me sometimes. Hug me. Not like that. A proper hug that will let you cry it out. What does my idiot boss think you did?"

For the first time in her 28, almost 29 years, Megan dissolved in complete abandon onto the shoulder of someone she knew without reserve would not let her down. "I just don't know. We debriefed over the meeting and that was fine and then that creepy detective tried to get me to confess, but Mac wasn't there. I said some harsh things about Mac but that was just to make that detective happy with the confession he thought he had, and then Mac went stupid on me. I was flirting with him. Men don't like woman who come on to them."

Wendy sorrowed for the life that had taught Megan that all show of emotion resulted in loneliness. "He can cope with it from you. It's something else has upset him," Wendy said.

Monday

Mac survived Monday by quarrelling with Wendy and Megan and by preparing for his departure. The previous night had been mercifully short because he slept like the dead. The action of the previous days and nights had left him too tired to do more than regret that there was no warm responsive body in bed beside him.

In the cold light of day the future looked bleaker. Megan could not go back to her own home for a time, even after Hugh's reported death, so Mac put in extra security in the room she was already using. Now it was a matter of waiting until Hugh's false body was found and then until he felt safe to leave Megan to get on with her life and he with his. That should have been a welcome step forward. It wasn't. Megan of course had already forgotten him. Once she realised he was not to be free labour and support she ignored him and got on with her life at the Moho.

Hugh whatever his morality was a man of his word and a quick worker. Megan took the phone in the office. "Mrs Roland? Murray Ransfield. I won't discuss this on the phone but we have what we need and formal identification is tomorrow. Mac has a coded message. We need to have you talk to the press as soon as possible."

Megan met Mac coming to find her. "No news really except that Hugh is as good as his word and the dentist will do the identification. You won't need to go. The police will come over this evening to make it look official, but that's just show."

Chatting to Mac was hollow and empty after what they had had together, so Megan went to see Eileen. Because the fewer people who knew the truth the better, Megan told Eileen that Hugh had

probably committed suicide because he couldn't pay his debts and to take the pressure off her. Eileen's long experience of listening to fabricated stories made her suspect that there was something more, but she didn't question further because that was not the reason for her neighbour's depression. "Eileen, where did I go wrong? I've ruined every relationship with every person who has crossed my path except perhaps you and Wendy." Megan broke off with a smile. "Wendy is impossible not to be friends with anyway. But with Mac I made an effort and he did too. We had something. I tried to give a bit of myself. Not enough, I never manage that, but hell this is me. Then just when it's magic I'm suddenly back to being Mrs Roland who is a suspect and we mustn't be too close. What am I, a one night stand? Even Hugh thought more of me than that."

Eileen gripped her friend's hands hard. "Don't give up at the first obstacle. Whatever Mac thinks you did or didn't do he is still obsessed with you. He'll come crawling back and if not you may have to humble yourself a bit. But whatever else happens thank Mac for giving you the confidence to make that last little speech. I had to look at your lips to make sure that that was you speaking." Megan smiled. "That was the last time. That cost. I nearly admitted I'm less than perfect. As for crawling back to the horrid Mr Lanell. I'd rather eat worms, and I don't have Wendy's ethical problems with that."

Eileen wondered what she was talking about.

The police came to advise Mrs Roland that although there was to be a formal identification the next day at which she wouldn't be required, she should now consider herself to be a widow. Since the policewoman concerned had been told that Mega already knew this and it was a formality she was rather puzzled, but she enjoyed it much more than a real death announcement and got a rather nice cup of coffee for her trouble, so she went away happy.

Tuesday:

Mac marvelled that somewhere that had seemed so light and pleasant and had given him so much joy of life, now seemed so oppressive. He had nothing to do except follow Megan in her daily chores and continue to investigate some minor jobs. He longed for home, but knew that going home without her would not make him feel better. Wendy was angry with him and never missed a chance to tell him he was being a louse. Eileen was friendly but clearly a bit more aloof and puzzled. Megan sailed on with running the Moho uncaring. Mac wanted to shout out loud to all of them that he had heard Megan denounce him as a gullible buffoon. Actually he didn't quite understand why he didn't do that. He didn't work out until later that the reason was that the pain was too great.

At midday the message arrived that Mrs Roland was officially a widow. By mid-afternoon the story had been leaked to the press and interviews were arranged. This proved to be more difficult than expected because Hugh was not yet a big name in New Zealand and his frauds had been so well covered that the public didn't know or care that thirty million had gone astray in Mr Roland's name. Apart from Mr Roland's Australian holdings which were not big news in New Zealand, that left only Megan herself, who fortunately could be made newsworthy. Beautiful girl-next-door makes good but is left in lurch by the untimely death of her big business Australian husband. At first only the local papers and regional TV were motivated to send reporters, but it was enough. Mr Sum had a chance to learn that Hugh Roland had lost all his money and was dead and that his bereaved wife was left with the clothes she stood up in and a large debt ridden business. They had bought time to try to redeem the banks' money.

Megan was magnificent. Eyeing the reporters and their cameras she almost simpered that her loving husband had had such high hopes for investment in New Zealand, and he was so honourable that when he struck misfortune he worked harder than ever but before he could recover he met with death. No it wouldn't have been suicide because he would never have left his wife in such difficult circumstances. She was living hand to mouth and would only keep the struggling Moho running because it brought valuable trade to the coast and employment to her staff. By evening the women's

magazines had picked up on the story and two major business publications would run stories with several glossy pictures, about Hugh Roland's Australian successes and the tragedy of a great businessman brought down by the vicissitudes of the local business climate. The pictures had very little to do with Hugh or business but were very detailed on the subject of his wife.

Mac watched the performance and almost managed to convince himself that he had escaped a terrible fate by getting away from such a conniving woman.

Wednesday:

Wendy knocked with her usual gusto on Eileen's door.

"Hi miss headmistress. We came for tea and biscuits and a talk." Eileen submitted to a vigorous hug from Wendy. Hers was not a generation that hugged, but she was very glad that Wendy could. A little more shyly she was embraced by Hemi.

Wendy rushed off to make tea, and then remember that often the elderly with little to do objected to their privacy and work being taken from them. "Umm shall I make tea, or sit demurely and behave?"

Rather to Wendy's chagrin, both Hemi and Eileen laughed loudly.

"No I wouldn't start now dear, you might as well make tea."

Hemi settle opposite Eileen. "We want advice on two things. One is the temporarily out of love, love-birds and the other is care and maintenance of children."

Wendy put a tray in front of them.

Eileen shrugged. "Our love-birds will get it sorted some time. I'm going to work on Megan and I expect Wendy will work on Mac. They are both proud non-communicators. When they discover that, they will deal with it and be stronger for it."

Wendy laughed. "Ok, work in progress. Now to the other love-birds who are now officially in their own eyes at least a boring old permanent couple."

Eileen glanced at Hemi to see if he knew this. He did. He smiled complacently and squeezed Wendy's hand. Here at least was communication and agreement.

Wendy saw the look and laughed. "It's ok Eileen I've already told him he's desperately in love with me. Anyway we want to do something with our lives beyond holding down jobs. Hemi's aunts run a foster home and we thought that with Hemi's building skills, my skill for telling people what to do and with your skills in young people we could make a team."

Eileen became aware of a satisfying feeling of being needed that she had never expected to experience again. She was being asked to use her abilities to be a productive member of society. The discussion went on for over an hour.

The rest of the week passed uneventfully. Megan and Mac exchanged essential words in a monotone and by Friday they were pleased that there was no longer need for Mac to be there. Hemi finished what had become for him a holiday and Wendy left with him promising Mac she would be in the office early on Monday to try to catch up on a mass of things that she had left undone when she had left so suddenly.

Mac went to find Megan before he left. It was typical of the bloody uncaring woman that she had forgotten he was going and was getting on with her work. "It's been an extraordinary two weeks, Megan. I won't forget it." Mac took a deep breath. It had to be said. "Or you."

To his astonishment Megan said goodbye with only the briefest glance at him and walked away. He missed hearing the final sentence when she said. "I wish I could forget you."

Two Weeks Later:

Hugh in death was even more efficient than Hugh in life. The Auckland hearing cleared Eastgate to proceed on a range of conditions which had already been negotiated. Maori, Green, roading and

City Council interests were all taken care of by land and resources freed up with the future closure of existing complexes which were now committed to a share in Eastgate. The new conglomerate of displaced industry and commerce invested in the right to buy and occupy Eastgate when it was completed. Loans were approved for the massive development and previous despondency became widespread enthusiasm for the new venture. Some bank officers were puzzled to be instructed to reinstate dead money and transfer it from failed and fraudulent investments to the vital new prosperous Eastgate development. Won Sum received an extraordinary request from New Zealand to submit an account for Mr Hugh Roland who it was understood owed money to them. The repayment went with an official warning that clandestine investment in New Zealand was not welcome and future transactions were to be notified to the appropriate authorities. Mr Sum, licking his wounds from two troublesome forays into Australasia appreciated the returned money, but failed to reply.

In an elegant Melbourne home that reflected the wealth of a family dynasty, Hugh Roland held his tearful mother in his arms and explained his new name to her and that she must use it for the next year or so. "Yes mum, I know you loved Megan but she has decided to stay in New Zealand. I think she has found someone else."

As Hugh listened to the tirade against unfaithful wives he thought back to his marriage and hoped that never again would he see anyone trying so hard to cover their disappointment and shame at any failure of his in either business or his bedroom. He had no intention of sharing that thought with his mother and left her to rage against her unfaithful missing daughter-in-law until she burned herself out.

Lanell Investigations was no longer a fun place to work. Wendy wanted to be home at Hemi's place. Also she had to tell Mac she would be leaving, and although getting away from Mac was a good idea, walking out on him now would be cruel.

"Wendy, why haven't you finished the Carnell report? I have to get it to them today."

Wendy was very slow to anger, but the constant stupid bickering of the last two weeks suddenly broke her. "I haven't finished it because there is at least five hours of work in it and you gave it to me three hours ago, and frankly I don't care and I'm leaving anyway, but before I do, if you don't tell me what happened at the Moho to upset you I'm going to start ripping up all your stupid reports one after another and then I am going to pour water into each of your stupid computers one after another, because you are shit and you don't deserve me and Megan is a fool for thinking you deserve her. But she cares for you and you are doing everything you can to hurt her worse."

If anyone had told Mac that he was capable of putting violent hands on Wendy he would have laughed in disbelief, but here he was grabbing her arms and dragging her to her feet. The fleeting look of fear before she hid it stopped Mac from doing something he would have been ashamed of for the rest of his life.

"Go on hit me. That's what gormless men do. It's easier than talking. Bash it in to submission that's the clever safe way."

Mac lowered her back into her seat stifling a sob. "I shouldn't have done that. I'm sorry. I loved her. I love you. Now is the time to leave if you're going."

Mac turned and set off back to his office.

"Oh no buster. Get rid of Wendy and there's another opportunity not to deal with it. What happened? You were great mates. Megan was interviewed over crimes she didn't commit and cleared herself and yet you turned into an even bigger asshole than usual. She deserves to know."

"It's not your damn business, Wendy."

"Oh yes it is Mac. This report here will be much better as two reports. Oh dear, right down the middle. Shit I am sorry."

Mac was on his feet again, but stopped himself just before he got to Wendy.

“For Christ sake cut that out. I had her bugged. Since the attack on her I wanted to know where she was. I heard the interview. How can I tell her that?”

“Jesus Mac, you had her bloody shower bugged and she knew it. That's how I knew she trusted you absolutely. She knew you could hear her in her own house and she put up with it. That was her way of telling you something and then you went and betrayed that trust.”

Mac was defeated. Wendy was making too much sense and he was making too little. The anger and the need to try to preserve any more manly pride drained out of him. It wasn't working anyway. “It was her lounge I bugged, not her shower, but that isn't the bug we're talking about. It was what she said at the interview”

Wendy thought back to what she knew of the interview from Megan. Megan had told her she had said stupid cruel things that she wished could be unsaid but that they got her out of trouble at the time. She began to understand but she wasn't quite sure what.

“What did she say Mac?”

“That she had no money and running the Moho was difficult so any man would do. She probably has one by now.”

Slowly the whole horrible picture fell into place for Wendy. “Oh you stupid, stupid, dork brained,” Wendy struggled for a word bad enough, “...man,” she concluded to her own satisfaction. “You know what she's like. She couldn't tell her teddy bear that she loved it. She had a detective badgering her about her future life, do you seriously think she's going to say that she's in love with you and is hoping to settle down to quiet business life and make little Lanells? Shit Mac, saying she'll grab the first man she sees when everyone knows she's seen you, is as close to a declaration of love as you're going to get from her for quite some time to come. She stuck to Roland for ten long years, most of them after the marriage had failed and even then she only went because he told her to. She's loyal brave sincere clever and yours for life if you stop screwing things up long enough to ask her.”

“You think she genuinely cares about me?”

“She is completely besotted, and like you, has no way to express it. It's called love, Mac. You can say it without the roof falling in on you. Yes, despite you being a worthless useless blot on the landscape, she loves you. Although I do ask myself why. Anyway why are you talking to me about this? Have you asked Megan? Have you even considered asking? Have you actually done anything except make our lives unbearable?”

Mac had another tricky woman situation he had to take care of and decided to move on. “Are you really leaving? I sort of rely on you these days?”

“Which is why you are coming to the Moho next weekend. Eileen, Hemi and I have a business proposition to make and you have things to say to Megan. You are going to be there without making excuses, which will relieve me of the job of ripping up more reports and tipping water into your computers.”

Mac gave in. He slumped into his desk and pretended to be occupied in getting back to office work.

“Go and type my reports including a reprint of the one you just tore up.”

“Yes sir.” Wendy hid the self satisfied smile and went back to her office.

It didn't occur to Mac to refuse to go next weekend but it did cross his mind that when he had charged the handgun on the back lawn of the Moho expecting to die at any moment that he hadn't felt as bad as he was feeling about this.

Wendy resolved not to tell Megan about Mac's change of heart. From her it would sound false. It had to come from Mac and he was the one who had to make it sincere. Wendy rang and booked a table like a regular guest. Then she rang Eileen to invite her to lunch at the Moho and to tell her that she was needed. Her plan seemed so optimistic as to be far fetched, but life is about trying. So try she would

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Next weekend:

The restaurant was busy as it usually was in the weekend. Mac felt a flood of contradictory emotions. Had it really only been two weeks he had spent here? It represented all of the most extreme emotions he had felt. Love, hope, bravery, expectation, but also fear, disappointment, anger and cowardice. He had left the Moho with as much to be done and risked as when he had first come, but it had been too hard. It had taken a furious Wendy to get him back on track.

Wendy was on a mission. There were times to jump in and times to pause and think. What if Megan was simply getting on with her life? What if she had a man. God knows she wouldn't stay available for long if she chose not to, and there were plenty of eligible men who passed through the Moho. Angela was closest to Megan. She was also sensitive to feelings. Wendy found her as she returned from settling some new guests in the outer block. "How's the boss?"

"Sad case. You know it's really odd, but we thought her marriage was lousy and we hardly saw Mr Roland, but when he died, Mrs Roland – she's Ambrel now – took it really badly. She used to be out here helping, but now she mostly just complains." Angela was startled to get a hug.

"I think I can fix that," Wendy said.

Upstairs, Megan was showing a cleaner where the dirt could still be found. When she saw Wendy she threw her arms around her and laughed. "You're taking me for lunch in my own restaurant you unimaginative cad?"

Wendy patted her affectionately. "It's the best there is and it's going to get better. You just wait and see."

When Megan walked into the restaurant and saw Mac she stopped dead. "Oh no, not that. I can't go through that again." Megan turned away and started to push past Wendy. Wendy stood firm.

Fortunately Wendy's stocky figure was enough to hold the taller more athletic Megan in place long enough for Megan to realise how undignified this was becoming.

At his table Mac got up and started the long walk across the room. He thought the journey would never end. He would have to meet Megan partway to the table. He understood the scuffle at the door. Megan was enjoying this as much as he was.

"Megan, we need to talk."

"I thought we did that when you told me to get out of your life."

"I never said that Megan."

"Oh you're right. I remember now you weren't that brave. We should have a professional relationship. You were only here to investigate so anything else wasn't appropriate. That's how it went. It was all heart warming stuff for two people who had been through what we had been through."

Neither Mac nor Megan were actually thinking of being shot at and attacked, but both hoped that the other was.

"I had you bugged at the interview, Megan."

"Well should I be surprised since you had my shower bugged?" But then suddenly she understood, and stopped dead. "Oh Mac, I didn't mean that. I wanted to get that detective off my case. I said that because he wanted to hear it."

"I realise that now. I was too shocked to deal with it, and anyway I thought you would be angry at being bugged again."

Mac and Megan stood lost in their thoughts in the middle of the restaurant as other faces turned to take in the sight, joining the three expectant faces already turned to them.

"I should never have said that Mac, but I hadn't even admitted to myself how I felt about you and I couldn't bring myself to tell that damn detective. I was weak and stupid."

"No, you were right. If I wanted to know how you felt about me, I should have asked you, not listened to a police interview. But I loved you too much to listen to that and forget it."

Mac took hold of her arms and turned her towards him. He pressed a gentle kiss onto her. "Start over and get it right this time?"

Happiness welled up in Megan and poured out of her in her brilliant smile. "Yes lets," she said. There was nothing more to say. Certainly not while standing in the middle of a restaurant. Hand in hand they started off again towards the others.

Lunch was a great success and became better and better as the others watched the new relationship that Mac and Megan had forged. But Wendy, who was busting to explain her great idea was beginning to suffer a crisis of confidence. Even for her this was rather deep meddling in other people's private lives. She watched Megan and Mac for a sign that it would work. Finally she gave up looking for the right opportunity and blurted it out anyway.

"Hemi and I are going to buy an old large house on the coast here somewhere. We have found a couple that might do, but if they fall through there will be others. We will marry and live happily ever after with a whole gaggle of foster children. We want to do something that will really make a difference and we feel that caring for disadvantaged kids is the best there is. Hemi will continue to build when possible and I will continue to use my huge IT and secretarial skills to earn extra money. Mac of course will be delighted to employ me part-time. Eileen has agreed to be part financier and child advisor and part-time delinquent admonisher. Here the scheme falters because I need to talk to Mac and Megan."

Eileen had been eyeing the increasing affection across the table. "No Wendy, we all have decisions to make. I'll say it now." She took a breath and plunged in. "We had considered that my house might be useful as an extension to the Moho. It is too large for me and on a sought-after coast that I never visit. Now if the proprietress was considering moving to a larger house for – well - marriage or anything..... and wanted my house, she could purchase it at a reasonable price and that would free some more funds for a foster home."

Megan held up a hand. "Eileen and bloody Wendy, you are the limit. I should throw you out of my establishment for excessive interference in the life of the owner, but I won't because I love you both and need to talk to you." She looked at Hemi and Mac. "Men, I need some time to speak to Eileen and Wendy I have a problem I just can't share with you yet."

Mac looked anxiously at Hemi. Life was galloping off to places unknown and leaving him behind. Hemi took the lead. "Let me show you how very waterproof are the cabins here at the Moho. They have been repaired by a genius," he said, as he led Mac away.

Mac looked suspiciously back to the table. "What problem does Megan have except a need to escape from me?"

"I can guess what problem our Megan has and it is definitely not escape. She never takes her eyes off you if she thinks you are not looking, just as you don't miss a chance to adore her. You two are in fact pathetic and a source of both amusement and dismay to the rest of us. You like kids don't you Mac?"

"Yes I like kids. Why?"

"I'm going to foster a dozen of so myself. Focusses the mind that does."

At the table Megan eyed the two women. "He said he loves me. He does, doesn't he?"

Two heads nodded. Wendy added, "And you love him. Your hired help told me."

Megan dropped her head in her hands. "I've been horrible." The two other women waited as Megan reflected silently. "It's not working the way it is."

"No it's not. And the problem?"

"I've not had a period for 6 weeks."

"You mean you're 6 weeks late?"

"No, just the 6 weeks and I have a queasy tummy"

Wendy chortled. "You're talking to the wrong women if you want to discuss pregnancy, but I think

that means you ate overripe fruit. But if not it means Mac doesn't it?"

"Certainly no one else," said Megan firmly. "We used my condoms, and for reasons you will no doubt speculate on, they were several years old." Eileen and Wendy silently digested this.

"And apart from things moving a little quickly, the problem is what?"

"Men don't like kids. I have to do something before I talk to him about the future."

"Megan, if doing something means having an abortion I think I shall have to become violent with you. God help us, playing cupid to you two is like administering a brawl in a kindergarten. This is part of your life with Mac. It is considered courteous to talk to men about their own children. Love is total and unconditional. He loves you and wants you. Contrary to what you think most men including Mac make great fathers. And we've seen you. You are magnificent with children. Now get off your pathetic little bottom and tell the man you love about it and act like a big grown up person." This speech was the more remarkable because it was Eileen who made it, while Wendy and Megan listened open mouthed.

But it worked. Megan knew she had to move quickly when the men returned. If she faltered again she would be lost and back in a twilight world of half truths and unspoken words. By the time Mac and Hemi came back into the restaurant she was very close to losing her nerve. Eileen and Wendy had not expected a restaurant showdown but Megan jumped up and again met Mac in the middle of the room. "Mac this scares me witless but I am going to say it now and loud because if I don't I will regret it possibly for the rest of my life and it will never get said. Reject me, humiliate me if you must, but I love you totally and unconditionally and I want to live with you so that I never have weeks again like the last few weeks. But you need to know that I expect a big wedding, and....," she broke off and silently cursed her fears. What would happen now? "And you need to know that there may be three of us."

Mac let out a whoop that could be heard on the lawn. He picked up Megan, gave her a loud wet kiss and spun her around.

"We're going to get married and maybe have a baby."

Two elderly patrons at the next table applauded enthusiastically.